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THE STORY OF A NOVEL

AND OTHER STORIES

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THE STORY OF A NOVEL

THE STORY OF A NOVEL

The guests had finally gone and the servants, fatigued by the excitement of the last busy days, retired out of sight; the house seemed to sink into the depths of the park, where the long unbroken silence aroused as always a longing in the woman's heart to play the game of imagination and revery.

She was twenty-seven, small, fair and slender, with an oval face pale as ivory; her eyes, the color of waves, were a trifle too large; they made her look a little older than her years. They were almost hidden under long eyelashes and glanced about with mingled distrust and expectancy.

There are women who are always expecting something: in their girlhood they await the coming of the man who is to love them, but when he comes, though they listen earnestly without the least perturbation, their eyes seem to say: "This is all very natural, but what next?" It would be a mistake to consider such women cold and deliberating. After marriage they love their husbands, while they patiently await the coming of

another love, perhaps even a "guilty" love. Such women often go off with another man, leaving a short note scribbled in pencil with a steady hand:

"Forgive me, Paul, but I cannot live with you any longer."

They do not always say "Forgive me." With the other man they sometimes lead a gay and exciting existence, sometimes a hard and miserable existence, but in either case they still expect something more to happen. They say little, their conversation is uninteresting, they do not care to philosophize aloud; they regard all the inevitable tragedies of their lives with calm resignation. When important events occur, their strange eyes seem to inquire,

"And is that all?"

Then the eyes darken to an obstinate frown: "No, it is not possible!"

And once again they wait, until all desire is gone except for a deep slumber in oblivion obtained in some other way. . . .

The heroine of the novel was one of those not particularly pleasant women I have been telling about. I speak here of the novel, because I cannot write my story as well as I should have liked if I were forced to speak of real people.

Wrapping her shoulders in a soft Penza shawl, she stepped out on to the porch and sat down in a squeaking garden chair. The purple leaves of the maple and the yellow leaves of the birch lay scattered about her feet on the three steps leading to the porch. A reddish sky burned through the trees and a transparent autumnal stillness pervaded the air, broken only by the strident chorus of titmice. The pale circle of the moon stood motionless at the zenith.

Half closing her eyes, she began to set her soul in order: the guests, and her husband, had bespattered it with endless disputations on Tolstoy and duck-hunting, the beauty of old Russian ikons, the inevitability of the Revolution, Anatole France and the mysterious soul of woman, with the latest and once more unsuccessful novel of the writer Antip Fokine—and a host of other matters. All had to be swept away, cast from the memory. Only a small residue was worthy of preservation or consideration.

Right across one of the planks of the floor of the porch you might see the deep mark of a blow evidently dealt with some sharp implement. That is where Fokine had killed a snake with a little hatchet. He was a heavy clumsy man, but at that moment he had shown the dexterity of a

cat and an enthusiasm as though killing a snake had been a longed-for joy. He hit the snake so hard that he had shattered the hatchet.

On the night of that same day, here on the porch he had read the beginning of his novel. It was about a man who had made fruitless attempts to discover whether he was a good fellow or a cad, and having committed many actions, both good and evil, failed to understand anything of himself. He had died, finally, alone in sorrow, a stranger to his own soul.

The author merely summarized the description of his hero's death, but he had read in their entirety the first four chapters, telling how young Paul Volkoff had come to see his sister at her country place where he was seized with an unconquerable aversion for the woman's husband, a coarse cynic who looked upon himself as an energetic exponent of culture.

The woman had thought these chapters dull; alone the description of the summer night was beautiful; vivid, too, was the picture of the hero sitting on a bench in the park. In an attempt to wound the woman who had left him for another, he vainly tried to compose hateful verses, but could complete only two lines:

"The moon shines, rejoicing in the light of her rays,
And lies like a woman with two lovers . . ."

He cursed himself for his stupidity.

On this occasion Fokine had made love to her more persistently than ever before, he spoke thrillingly of his loneliness when he was among people. But she already knew how seldom one meets a man who in addressing an attractive woman failed to speak of his solitude; she was aware that few people cared to boast of their happiness. The more attentively she listened, the more intangible Fokine seemed to become; she had at last become penetrated by the strange notion that he was not a man at all, but a stage on which an endless and incomprehensible drama was being performed. He had a striking appearance: he stood out among other men, a stolid, ugly man, absent-minded, childishly careless about himself. He had watched her, casting warm glances with his soft gray eyes, and spoke in a hoarse but rippling tone. Knowing that he could not articulate well, he had adorned his conversation with rich mimicry and gesticulations, sometimes even stamping his feet like a pianist pressing the pedals. At the same time it seemed as though he were not present himself, but in his stead a crowd of men, women, children, peasants and officials,

all speaking with his voice, saying contradictory and amusing things, dull, stupid, terrible things, and all shamelessly clever. But just where Fokine himself was among this multitude, and what he was really like, could not be determined.

Of his love he spoke to the woman in the simple words of a youth who feels for the first time the power of that which transfigures the soul. A few days later he had spoken of it again, that time with the cynicism of a man who no longer believes in himself, and seeks in his infatuation for a woman something that will deaden the unrest within his heart. It was clear to her that he was neither simple nor cynical, kind nor unkind, and not as clever as he was gifted; she felt that the source of his discontent lay in an unsatisfied ambition. She adopted a cautious attitude toward him; he was a man who did not exist, and though his physical self was present, his soul (however attractive it seemed to be) was absent. He was not a man, he was a movable theater, in which the manager and all the players were incarnated in one character. Very interesting, of course, but unsafe.

The woman smiled, glancing toward the park, amused at the idea that suddenly coursed through

her mind: it was impossible to love a whole assembly of men, though it might be interesting to surrender to many in the person of one. Still, a woman should never love a writer if she would avoid disfiguring her soul. Thus disposing of Fokine as a man, she felt some irritation with the author, but this was immediately to give way to a sensation of utter amazement.

She was looking toward the park, her eyes half closed. There, among the branches of the birch-trees, shadows appeared, clearly outlined against the purple sunset, while on the bench sat a man in a white suit wearing a panama hat and swinging a cane.

Who can that be, she wondered? Everyone has gone. And in a white suit, too, at this time of year! It was unpleasantly obvious that someone had not gone. Or perhaps it was some stranger who had stepped into the park to admire the reflection of the sun on the pond? But why the summer suit? There he was, tracing figures on the ground with his stick. A moment later she decided to send her maid to inquire who the stranger might be.

When she rose her chair screeched. The sound penetrated the stillness, but the man seemed

to hear nothing. Then she descended the steps to the cold ground, and walked along the path. She noticed that her steps were unwontedly rapid. But on approaching him she perceived that he was no larger or clearer close by, than he had been at a distance. Strange! Twilight does play queer tricks on one. But stranger still, the man, though he had the red light of the dying sun directly upon him, cast no shadow. The leaves he was raking together made not the slightest sound, seemed indeed not even to move when he touched them. She felt as though she were suddenly taken in the huge embrace of an invisible power that led her round and round in some stately waltz.

The man rose to meet her, took off his hat politely though a little awkwardly, bowed and asked in a low voice:

"Pardon me—is that you?"

He was young, smartly dressed, but rather colorless. He had a long dry face, blue eyes, and a small flaxen beard. There was something unnaturally transparent in his rigid features. He was like none of her friends, and yet she felt she had met him before.

"What a strange question!" she said, laughing. "Of course it's I."

He returned a mechanical smile and his face assumed a pathetic cast.

"So you are really the woman I am supposed to meet!" Then he added, striking his cane loiselessly across his leg: "Though I am not positive that I *am* to meet a woman here. . . ."

She looked fixedly at him; she had seen eyes like his in portraits. It required an effort of the imagination to believe they were alive. The man is evidently shy, she thought. There was some mystery here. He is doubtless one of those shadowy friends of her husband, or of Vera Ivanovna, hiding from the police. Politics, maybe. But what an absurd disguise!

"Do you come from Vera Ivanovna?" she asked.

"Is she too in the novel?"

"What do you mean, in the novel?"

The man shook his head. "I don't remember any woman of that name in it."

"In what?"

"In the novel."

A lunatic! Wrapping herself more tightly in the folds of her shawl, she inquired drily: "I don't know what novel you are talking about, but I think I have a right to inquire, who are *you?*"

He looked at her intently. His eyes, that seemed painted on the surface of his face, expressed astonishment. His lips curved into a smile and he nodded in acquiescence:

"Of course it is your right. I think the novel begins at this very moment, with this meeting. I suppose the author intended it to be this way: at first you treat me with suspicion, almost hostility, and then—well, I don't know, but so far as I'm concerned, a new tragedy will begin for me."

"Yes, a lunatic" was her unspoken comment as she listened to his slow colorless words. His face seemed a little more alive, less flat. As for herself, she experienced a strange sensation, as though she were falling asleep. But she was interested and wished to hear more.

"I am simply amazed that you should ask about the novel," he went on. "Tell me, you are not trying to mystify me, are you? You *are* the woman? You have some connection with Fokine, or rather with his novel, haven't you?"

She found it hard to repress a laugh. She at once grasped the situation:

"Ah, so it's Fokine! He couldn't come himself, so he staged this mystery! Yes, I know the novel. But what about it?"

The man became still more animated, and said:

"Then everything is all right. But I never thought it would be so difficult. . . ." Then, almost graciously, and with a smile, "Of course, you must be the right woman, or I should never have met you."

"It's getting cold and damp," she said, "suppose we go indoors?"

The man bowed and thanked her. He did have a strange smile, it looked as though it had come from behind him. He walked with a wonderfully light step, under which no leaf rustled. But strangest of all, he had no shadow. The woman's shadow, on the other hand, was long and clearly defined, it crawled, darted, vacillated, now on one side, now on the other.

"How does he manage it?" she wondered, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He seemed all at once to have become quite flat.

"Have you seen Fokine recently?" she inquired. In some surprise he replied:

"About two years ago."

What a poor joker he is, she thought, and aloud she said: "You are dressed rather lightly for the season."

"Why, that's Fokine's fault," he answered with a shrug. "You see, I was cast for a part during the summer. . . ."

She was feeling decidedly uneasy. "Who are you, anyway?" she asked once again, and once again the man was astonished. Lashing the air with his cane in the same strange noiseless way, he laughed an ugly artificial laugh.

"How strange you should ask that! Can you have forgotten? Let me remind you: I am Paul Volkoff, son of an engineer, and myself a civil engineer; an idle fellow, a failure in life; I am thirty-two and rich. Six years ago I married for love, and four years later my wife deserted me, leaving a note written in pencil, 'Forgive me, Paul, but I cannot live with you any longer.' At present she is somewhere in the Caucasus, but I believe I am not supposed to meet her again. I'm not positive. That is all I know about myself. The rest is not yet written."

He spoke his speech as if he were reading a passport; only at the end did the woman detect a note of irritation and revolt. She too was a trifle irritated as she thought:

"If he is a lunatic who imagines himself the hero of Fokine's unsuccessful novel, he isn't even clever."

As they were mounting the steps to the porch she turned to him and asked: "How do you manage not to cast a shadow?"

"What use have I for a shadow?" he demanded in surprise, "You never see shadows in dreams, do you? And all this is like a dream."

"What is like a dream?"

"This existence of ours, people created for the amusement of others—*real* people."

He spoke these words so simply that the woman began to think him rather a clever actor.

"Ah, that's what it is!" she exclaimed laughing. "You are not a real person." Then suddenly she lowered her eyes, embarrassed. He was looking at her in open astonishment. He appeared to be shaken and tossed by a wind she did not feel. The unnatural movements of his body reminded her of a sheet in a breeze.

"How extraordinary you should ask me that!" he said. "Really, I think you are mystifying *me*. Or possibly Fokine created you still more carelessly than he did me, and you have no definite plan of action? Or have you become real in some strange fashion and are not accessible to me? Or, finally, Fokine perhaps finished you and forgot all about me? You are a completely realized character?"

"Yes, he is indeed an accomplished actor," she mused. She felt that she was dreaming a dream against her will and made an effort to rid herself of the sensation.

"You don't answer?" he said. "I should like to believe your silence means that you are reminiscing? Is that the case?" She nodded. He went on: "You remember the beginning of the novel?"

"I know it."

"Well, then?" A short pause. "Ah, I understand. Fokine doubtless forgot to bring us together, introduced some other man in my place. What I can't understand, though, is your not seeming to know what you are intended to do."

Her curiosity was now fully aroused. Conquering her uneasiness, she tried to discover what attitude to adopt.

"No," she said, "it is your part I don't understand. Tell me about yourself."

"I have already told all I know."

"So you don't exist—as it were?"

"No, that's not the trouble," he said petulantly, "the point is, I *do* exist! For you, of course, I exist until Fokine decides otherwise, but at the same time I exist independently of him."

"I see: just as Hamlet and Don Quixote exist independently of their creators!"

Volkoff bowed his head and continued: "Yes, approximately. But naturally, Fokine is not Cervantes, still less Shakespeare. And besides, I am not a finished character. All in all, I find myself in a most absurd situation. Just think, I've been sitting on that bench for two years! You must admit that is absurd. Days, nights, dawns, sunsets, dust, heat, summers, autumn rains, snow, winter storms—all comes and goes, and I sit waiting. Sometimes people passed by, real people, and talked about unnecessary and uninteresting things. Once a little freckled fellow in a silk suit tried to seduce a little fat lady by telling her that luscious pineapple melons grew in his greenhouse. Then he bit her ear, and she shrieked. How unspeakably stupid it all is, how tiresome, and how absurd! One sits and thinks: how boring, how foolish and prolix real people can be, and how much more interesting we imaginary creations are! We are always more spiritually concentrated, we have more poetry and romance about us. And to think that we exist solely for the amusement of these dull, real people!"

He spoke as if he felt an actual sense of injury, and his dry face became a little softer. But perhaps that was due to the dusk in the room.

"Naturally, I don't know just what real people are like, and besides, what is reality? For example, this room and everything in it—is that reality, or is it something else, like you and me? Created in the imagination of Fokine?"

She passed her hand gently over her face, glanced furtively about, and murmured: "All this is very interesting, but somewhat fatiguing."

"That is only natural," he returned. "But, you know, as for myself during the two years I've been waiting for Fokine to complete me, I seem to have grown stronger, more real. Yes, I am almost real——"

The woman felt uncomfortable, and she wanted to say so to her insane visitor, but at that moment the maid appeared in the doorway and stood there gaping like a fish on the end of a line.

"What is it, Glasha?"

"You called?"

"I? No."

"Pardon me. I thought I heard you speak?"

"Certainly. Don't you see——?"

She rose, looked about and opened and closed her eyes in wonder. Volkoff, who had been

standing with his back to the window, was nowhere visible. Outdoors, she could see the leaves slowly dropping from the motionless boughs of the maples. She looked out the window for some time, and imagined at last that she perceived a fine dark thread cut across the window-pane.

"Yes," she said with some annoyance, "I did speak. I called you. Bring tea." The moment Glasha had left, she began to reflect: "I suppose this is what is called hallucination of the sight and hearing, a complex form. I wonder what happened to me? Strange. . . ." She sank into a chair, stretched out her feet and covered them with a rug. "I must write Fokine about it. It may give him a new theme to write about. Though I am not sure—it's not in his line: he's a realist." She realized how incoherently these thoughts were coursing through her brain, and she was thankful the nightmare was over.

"Well, as I was saying," she heard, and the man stood at the window exactly as before, stroking his forehead with one hand and balancing his hat with the other.

"Excuse me," she said in an irritated tone, "where were you when the maid was here?"

He opened his eyes wide and moved a step

toward her. With a swift gesture she forbade him to come closer.

"Why, I was right here by your side. I see, you lost sight of me. That was because I was standing sidewise; that way I'm flat as a card or a sheet of paper. Have you forgotten? Of course not. You too, are made that way."

"No!" she protested, "No, no!"

"How difficult you are to get along with," he said with a sigh. It sounded as if he were scolding her, but his features were immobile, exactly like the features in a picture. An occasional shadow seemed to flit over his countenance, but left his pale cheeks exactly as they were. It seemed, like his smile, to come from somewhere behind or beyond him. He was like a reflection on water, tossed here and there by the breeze.

"How does he do it?" she wondered, and then ordered him to stand a little to the left. He moved away and stood in front of the mirror. There was no reflection, only the ghost of a shadow.

"Hallucination! That's what it is!" she thought.

"You have a very difficult character," Volkoff continued. "I see you are again in doubt; you haven't the courage to take me for what I am.

I seriously question whether this attitude of yours is according to Fokine's original plan. Besides—" He swayed to and fro and then seemed to be floating up in the air as he went on: "Besides, I feel I am now sufficiently real to continue the unfinished novel on my own initiative and responsibility. I refuse to go on with this life of idleness. I am not going to sit on that bench any longer in all kinds of weather, listening to conversations about melons to the end of time. Fokine created me and then forgot all about me. I have heard that God does that with some people, but He doubtless has good reasons to justify His rather incomprehensible experiments. But Fokine, so far as I know him, is a very ordinary, aggressive little fellow, awkwardly imitating God in this game of chess. You know, I think he's insane. You should see him when he is alone! He fills his room with the creatures of his imagination and, surrounded with a host of phantoms as insane as himself, he really feels lost among them and does not know what to do with them. He is a raving maniac. For the past two years I have thought a great deal about him, and I am amazed at the mad ambition of the man. Just think, he is surely aware that, like other artists, he complicates life in an im-

possible way, fills it full of imaginings. And what, after all, are we imaginings? We are essentially persons and things belonging to reality, but distorted according to the will of these conjurors of words and phrases. They too, are the creatures of the imagination of someone or something else, set in motion for the amusement of real people, but they don't see that! There are no monsters at which real people mock so cruelly as at these creators, who are sown in the fields of reality, ostensibly for the purpose of adorning them. Don't you think life would be more simple and comfortable, less crowded with contradictory elements, if it were not for these Don Quixotes, Fausts, and Hamlets? Just consider it."

Volkoff delivered this long harangue with great animation and a certain amount of sarcasm, and with the self-assurance of wisdom possessed among real people only by the literary critics. It is always a token of ineradicable spiritual ignorance. He swayed strangely on his feet, undulating like a mirage, though his silhouette continued to retain the outline of a human being. But round the woman everything swam, and she was intoxicated with a strange curiosity.

"Yes," he repeated, "I have determined to continue the novel on my own initiative. I need

only to find a woman—rather convince you that I am the man Fokine intended for you." He looked at her inquiringly and added with annoyance: "In the real world, it is ordained that a man cannot make a single step without a woman. Life would be intolerable without her."

"If I understand you correctly," she said slowly, and then stopped as though prompted by a vague but insistent notion that filled her with a curious warmth.

"Yes?" he inquired. The maid entered with tea, and Volkoff this time did not disappear.

"Two cups, Glasha."

"Two?"

"Of course——"

With a nod in the direction of the departing maid, Volkoff inquired:

"Is she too a creature of Fokine's imagination?" In order to avoid answering him, she bowed her head. Volkoff assumed that she had answered in the affirmative.

"I can't make out why one should have to create such ugly forms!"

"Will you have tea?"

He straightened himself and said with a melancholy air:

"I wonder you don't offer me brandy or vodka!

It is quite clear Fokine has not put the finishing touch to you. You don't know how to behave towards me. That is why we are both playing a farce instead of acting out a novel. I don't know what I am to do. In order to achieve complete realization I must have a woman, and that woman is you. But you evidently don't know your rôle, or else, as I say, Fokine sketched you even more carelessly than he did me. Finally, you won't even believe your own eyes: I have no means of convincing you that I am neither a phantom nor an hallucination, nor (please realize this) the creature of your own fantasy. Not yours, but Fokine's, don't you see?"

She saw that it was all impossible rubbish, and I trust that my intelligent reader agrees with her. Only in that regard, however! I have known my intelligent reader now for thirty years as a terribly strong-minded individual, and my esteem for his reason is strengthened by my knowledge of that stoic obstinacy whereby he manages to forget the sordid uselessness of his hard and martyr-like existence.

I am filled with emotion to see the respect with which the reader regards the reality he has himself created, even though that reality is ridiculously inconvenient for him. I am filled with

admiration for the horror felt by the reader every time the author's sordid imagination raises in vain its loud voice against reality, that strong and tightly-woven net of absurdities that drags the reader off to be pickled in brine. I respect my reader because he does not protest when I try to make people and things better, more interesting and more intelligible than they are in reality.

This digression is of course unpardonable, but I was driven to it by a foolish desire to pay a compliment to the reader, and such a thing is always in order. To continue. As we have already observed, the woman did not believe in the supernatural, but she determined to treat the situation in all earnestness, not only for fear she might be on the verge of madness, but because she wanted to see——

"After all," she mused, "why should not I do what Fokine does? Creating characters out of imagination can't be as difficult as bearing children!" Looking thoughtfully at her visitor she said: "So far as I remember, Fokine's novel—" She stopped, and then continued: "How is it done? How did he create you?"

With the same queer smile, only this time it seemed glued to the surface of his face, Volkoff answered softly:

"I really can't tell you. I suddenly felt, understood somehow, that I existed, that my name was Paul Volkoff, that I had fair hair, and so on. My unsuccessful and unhappy romance can be explained, I think, by the fact that I am a meditative man, fond of analysis, and that I am preoccupied chiefly with myself. The so-called external world is only an object for me to meditate about. It makes me retire into myself, but on the other hand, something inside my soul is always trying to force itself out. I am designed to live a very agitated life, and in the end, I think, to realize myself in the pursuit of various sensations. I feel that I already existed before Fokine conceived me, but rather as an agglomeration of dissociated fragments, even less 'achieved' than I am now. That is all I can tell about myself."

The woman, somewhat surer of herself, reflected: "He is just an ordinary man. And particularly modest. I am not going out of my mind at all. I am simply the witness of something I don't understand. And, besides, there's a trick about it somewhere."

Volkoff went on: "I was evidently created because Fokine wanted me to exemplify some truth of his. That's what all creations were made for, don't you think?"

She dared not say Yes. This man, after all, was a total stranger to her, perhaps even a suspicious character. Why should she disclose to him the little mysteries of the world? She wisely concluded that if he were an ordinary mortal, he was bound to disclose it the moment she began flirting with him. She therefore pulled one of her attractive ankles from under the rug and swinging it in full view—

"I remember," she said, "what Fokine's conception of you was. Precisely like the description you have just given me."

"I am glad," he replied. "It is a very difficult rôle, but I'm glad you say that. Once one has been created, there is nothing to do but go on living."

"Yes," she acquiesced, after a moment's reflection. "Later, it is true, you must meet one of those women who are always waiting for something to come into their lives, always making up their minds and always acting unexpectedly. To the end of their days, at least until they are old, life seemes inexhaustible, yet they lack the energy and daring to seize upon its pleasures. They seem to think that just beyond or beside them is still hidden the greatest, the sweetest pleasure. To discover it, to delight in it spiritu-

ally and physically, is their highest aspiration. I am sure I am not that kind of woman, and when Fokine created you, he wasn't thinking of me in relation to you. Though you know, these writers——"

Volkoff made a gesture of indignation:

"Yes, I know what you mean. Terrible! Criminal frivolity! You can't conceive how many such unfinished hideous imaginary beings there are like you and me!"

"Really!" She was embarrassed, and added dubiously: "Hideous?"

He did not bother to answer her, but continued speaking with an animation that looked more and more human, though he spoke in a tone of complaint: "They think that a creation of theirs, once set on paper, is the end of the matter. They forget that only the outline remains on the page, while the image itself is thrust into the world to exist there, as you and I exist, a psychological emanation of the writer's brain, the embodiment of brain and nerve force, something, in fine, more real than anything else. But you know that, of course?"

"Oh, of course. But why don't you sit down at the table?"

He approached her and seated himself. But it

was clear to her that her little trick had passed unnoticed. With a sigh she tried to imagine herself in a world of half-complete beings, but could not, because she seemed to see before her the whole circle of her acquaintances, among whom she had not yet succeeded in finding the man she longed for and needed, who would be as perfect as a musical instrument in the hands of a genius. She knew that this ideal man would at once understand her slightest wishes the moment they came into being, even divine them beforehand and minister to them. Without asking questions, he would know what to say. He need not talk much, but he must feel everything, understand all, and never blame her unless she wished to be blamed. Meantime she heard the low tones of her visitor's voice:

"And now we are confronted with something inevitable. Fokine put a certain amount of psychological material into me, and I sprang into existence, but the moment after I realized this, I felt that there were other things within me, superfluous thoughts and contradictory ideas. They came from the outside. Though I realized that this was disfiguring me, I could do nothing. At that time I had no genuine instinct for life, and I could not get into Fokine's consciousness,

which was beclouded with a thick emanation of psycho-physical matter."

"It is possible," the woman thought, "that this creature is not yet an actual human being, and I might be able to complete him by giving him what he needs and seems to want. Pygmalion's task was no more difficult." She shut her eyes, listening to Volkoff's voice, so soft and transparent that it did not interrupt the train of her thoughts or prevent her hearing the shepherd Kirka playing the accordeon off in the village, the girls singing and the dogs barking at the moon, that shone now almost as brightly as the sun.

"And now I can understand what I owe to Fokine, my creator, and what to the other characters. I feel some of his thoughts within me, thoughts that have no relation to me as the hero of his novel. I have already told you that Fokine is a miniature mad-house in himself, or, if you prefer, a highroad on which characters are always walking, where thoughts and ideas, contradictory and mutually exclusive, course pell mell on their way. For instance, I cannot believe that nature does not know what she wants, and that, able to produce anything, she goes to the trouble of creating superfluous monstrosities. That's another of Fokine's aphorisms that is of no use to

me. I carry about thousands like that, ridiculous, useless. But possibly that was why I was created, simply to bear them about with me? I don't know the chief point, even: am I supposed to be a good man or a scoundrel?"

She extended a hand to him, smiling:

"That is precisely what you must not know. The whole point lies in that, that you should be unable to distinguish good from evil."

"You really think so?" he asked, pulling at one of the buttons of his flannel coat.

"Yes, that is the way I understand your function in the story. If you knew good from evil, life would be a terrible bore. This way it's far more interesting."

Volkoff pondered over this. He was puzzled about something. It was unnatural that he should pay no heed to her extended hand, as any other man would have done.

"Ye-es," he said, "but interesting to whom?"

"To me. To you. To the reader."

"Hm! To the reader?" He passed his hand over his hair and eyes, and then shaking his head, said with a smile: "Don't you think this a rather cruel game? Only think: we are made to suffer countless miseries, we are set against each other like animals in order to create dramatic sit-

uations; tossed about like playthings, simply that the reader, who happens to be chronically bored, may be amused. Is it not cruel that some should suffer in order that others may be amused? This may be Fokine's idea. A fine idea, I assure you! On the whole he is a decent chap. Not over presumptuous, and that's a sign of decency. Sometimes he throws down his pen, and asks 'Why do I write?' He, personally, does not like suffering. It is repulsive to him. Unfortunately, artists have no other material at their disposal but suffering humanity. . . ."

The woman moved her chair closer to him, and asked: "Tell me, how *do* you perform these tricks with your shadow in that mirror?"

But immediately she felt like a hunter whose gun goes off unexpectedly. She was a bit disconcerted, and then laid a gentle hand on her visitor's arm.

"Don't be angry," she said. But her hand, as it lay on the man's sleeve, felt only a rough knitted cloth with nothing inside it. This was decidedly unpleasant. But when she heard a voice in the distance speak in tones of anger, she was terrified:

"So you are not Fokine's creation, but just an ordinary flesh-and-blood woman!" Volkoff rose,

swung his hat about with a curious motion, and repeated in angry amazement:

"What is the sense of this mystification?" He undulated towards the porch and stood in the doorway, fluctuating in the moonlight.

"See here," she said, coming up to him, "this is too incredible. Nothing will convince me that you——"

As she walked, she realized for the first time that the earth turns on its axis, with an absurd and unnecessary rapidity. "Readers!" exclaimed Volkoff, turning away disgusted. He held his cane under one arm and from his pocket took a pair of gloves, and put them on like a provincial actor playing the part of an injured hero. But to the woman it seemed that the gloves were suddenly filled not with human flesh but with compressed air.

In the bright moonlight Volkoff's figure looked like a phantom. It was green. Now it had reached the pond, the group of birches, where it disappeared among the trunks of the trees. She rubbed her eyes. All was still except the dogs, who kept up a continual wail. The clock ought, of course, to have struck twelve, and an owl hooted once or twice, but I shan't tell the reader of things that did not happen. I am a ruthless

realist; the stern brutal truth of my stories is acknowledged by all critics, at least all who can read; those who cannot, agree with the others in their estimate of my virtues, as well as of my defects, especially my defects. Personally, I am convinced that these defects are constantly increasing, and that before long I shall reach the goal of perfection so far as they are concerned. This however, relates to the future. For the present, my problem is how to end my story. That is not a difficult matter. For instance:

The woman sighed, looking off into the distance. There, behind the dusky glittering orb of the pond, the forest rose like a huge eyelash. Not a bad image, at least an unusual one.

Over the black heap of the forest three stars swam slowly into the sky, and the woman recognized them as the Wise Men of Orion. The sky was otherwise empty of stars. The light of the moon eclipsed all other light. Slowly closing the porch door, the woman retired into a small cosy room, a warm nest where she was wont to hatch the chicks of her fancy. Rubbing her cold cheeks with the palms of her hands, she stood before the mirror. Her eyes looked like the eyes of a stranger, round with fear and amaze-

ment. They could not believe that this graceful little woman——

"He can hardly be a man," she mused. "If he were— Why, now I come to think of it, he has almost insulted me!"

She sat down by a table, and remained there for a long while, playing with her nail scissors. Then she began to polish her nails. It is always easy to think when you are polishing your nails. Thoughts crowded into her head like specks of dust in a ray of sunlight. But she disliked all her thoughts, and this irritated her. She had made a great effort to direct her thoughts upon Fokine.

Then suddenly she realized that though he was neither handsome nor graceful, he was none the less the most interesting of all her friends. Then, with no less amazement, she discovered that for a long time she had been thinking of him, that all that had taken place only a few minutes ago was only a game she had played, psychically, with a man who was so much more amusing than all the others. Opening her writing pad, she hastily wrote this letter to Fokine:

"Dear Antip Titich! A quarter of an hour ago I lived through a marvelous, incredible, mad

experience. If you have any stronger adjectives, use them. Do you know who came to visit me? Paul Volkoff, the hero of your novel, the man you spoke of so much and so well. I could not, then, however, form any clear picture of him. You must not think I have seen a real man who looked like him; no, it was Paul himself. But, forgive me, he bore very little resemblance to the character created by you, indeed to any human being. He said he was the incarnation of your creative power, existing in a shape I could not understand: externally, he resembles a man, but as for his soul—well, he is heartless. He seems unfinished. He is even impervious to the most ordinary feminine blandishments. He has no emotion. He is quite well dressed, but awkward. He complained that, having created him, you proceeded to forget about him. He openly declared that he would rebel against this injustice, live on his own responsibility, shape his life henceforward on the basis of the material you have already given him. This is how I understand your hero.

Please don't think me insane, that I am the victim of hallucination. Nothing of the sort: the fact that I treated this strange visit with perfect presence of mind, reasonably and critically,

should serve as proof of my mental equilibrium. Your hero, in a word, does not appeal to me; I am certain that with such a man as a leading character in your story, the novel could not be a success. Can there be anything interesting in the life of an uninteresting person? He is not even particularly clever. He is not a success, and you must re-write him. Anyway, you must do something to prevent his roaming about the world like a ghost. It would surely hurt your reputation. Today he comes to me, tomorrow he may go to another woman; he is looking for a woman the way Diogenes looked for a man."

She stopped writing, doubtful whether she was attaching too great importance to the matter; besides, was not her letter a trifle ridiculous? "No," she decided, "I shall let it stand as it is: it is more amusing that way." She wrote for a long while, consumed by a desire to annihilate Volkoff completely. What use was he anyway? What use were all the half-realized characters of fiction? Finally, bringing her missive to a close with many affectionate phrases, she called the maid, ordered her to fasten the shutters securely, and lock the door leading to the porch, adding:

"Glasha, you will lie down on the couch in the next room. I don't feel very well, and may per-

haps have to call in the night." She then undressed, lay down and, trying to picture to herself in what frame of mind Fokine would receive her letter, fell asleep.

His answer arrived in a few days:

"I read your charming and very clever letter on this dull rainy night. It is cold in my room as it is cold in my heart. I have just been at a party, and came home on foot. The rain beat down incessantly on my umbrella. I was thinking of you, and composed some verses. They are not, of course, especially good, but believe me, they are sincere."

She smiled. Fokine had forgotten that he had already recited these same verses to her last spring when they were on a boat-ride together. Perhaps it was just as well he had forgotten: she had been irritable that evening and told him that such poetry could be turned out by the mile.

The rest of Fokine's letter read as follows: "And on my return I find your letter, so unusual, so full of friendliness, which I sorely needed, and showing a serious interest in my work. Thank you. You have revived that pitiful novel in my memory and definitely killed my hero. I took the manuscript, read it through, blushed for shame, and tore it into small bits. Paul Volkoff

will not come to disturb you again." Besides, he wrote everything that a man writes to a woman he is anxious to conquer. Flattery of course, but—as sometimes happens—the flattery was often sincere.

She became pensive, and looked out the window into the park, where the long rays of the autumnal sun spread a soft hue over the trees. The wind was brisk and whirled the few remaining yellow leaves to the frozen ground.

This is really the end of the story.

How the woman behaved I cannot say, but I think she wrote to her husband, "Forgive me, Paul, but I cannot live with you any longer." I likewise know nothing of her husband. It is possible that he is one of those rare beings whom women do not leave for another man. It seems to me that men of that type must be deaf, dumb, lame, and altogether hideous, or else so completely unhappy and pitiful that nothing can make them more so: their unhappiness cannot be increased.

This story ought to end with a lyrical description of a landscape, but I will not write it; it is quite good enough as it stands.

AN INCIDENT

The red-haired, long-nosed doctor had just probed with his icy fingers the body of Igor Bikoff and declared with an air of finality that the disease, already far advanced, was now incurable. The patient felt exactly as he had years before when, as a young recruit in the Turkish War with Eni-Sagra, he had lain all night in a clump of prickly shrubs with a broken leg, soaked through by a hard rain.

"Well, does that mean I'm going to die? Eh?" The doctor, who was seated at the table preparing to write, paused a moment, playing with a rusty pen, and murmured unintelligible words. Bikoff, deeply troubled, paid no attention, but looked out the window, where a sharp wind was whirling a conglomerate mass of feathers, filings and dust along the street.

"I'm only forty-nine——"

"You've been a hard drinker."

"That isn't the reason," he argued listlessly, "Everybody drinks, but that doesn't mean they all die before their time."

"Now, there goes a hen. She'll live, lay eggs, hatch chickens. But *you* will die, and all your hard work will go for nothing . . ."

He heard the doctor out in silence.

Bikoff looked at himself in the mirror. He was dressed in his underclothes, over which he had thrown a dressing robe. His bare feet were thrust into slippers; he wore no socks. He could see every line in his long, narrow face, and perceive only too clearly the pair of greenish eyes, the straight hair of his long dark beard falling to his chest. Not an altogether prepossessing picture.

He sighed, moaned softly, and threw himself into a leather arm-chair near the window. He was acutely aware of his malady, now boring away at his liver, weakening him, and filling him with sullen rage and bitterness.

"Drinking, eh? And how do you console yourself, you fool?" He thought this, but said nothing aloud. The doctor had already left and was now getting into his cab. . . .

"Do you want the samovar?"

Agafia the cook, a fat and stupid woman, stood at the door.

"How often have I told you, you red-faced idiot, not to put the arm-chair at the window,

right in the sunlight? Don't you see how it's faded?"

"But you put it there yourself," Agafia ventured, and Bikoff remembered what pain it had cost him to move the heavy chair. But this, together with the woman's meekness, only irritated him the more.

"Oh, go to the devil!"

Agafia disappeared. Bikoff followed her with his eyes, reflecting: "And this creature will live another forty years, while I have to die! What am I going to do about my property? I never had time to marry. Too much business. I ought to have married right after the war. I'd have had a family by now. Too cautious, that's the trouble. Now it's too late to try a cure. How was I to know my life was going to be cut short this way?"

He bowed his head, saying aloud: "Good God above, why?"

Most vexatious of all, there was no one to leave his property to. He had a good deal, the fruit of twenty years' labor and crafty manipulations. Give it all to a monastery or other religious institution? He could not bring himself to think seriously of that. He knew well enough that priests and monks and suchlike who managed

God's earthly possessions, were unreliable; they were sinners like himself. Even God Himself—well, he was not sure. His attitude toward God was suspicious: God knew all Bikoff's thoughts, saw through him, was cognizant of his every deed. No human being had so often interfered with his covetousness. It often happened that all was ready for some great venture when suddenly something flared in his soul, awakened dark unwelcome thoughts, roused the fear of punishment. Sometimes he was prevented from carrying through a plan out of compassion for others.

He knew well enough that such things were not jokes played by the devil, but the hand of God, compelling him to capitulate against his better judgment. He had used to say to his neighbor Kikin the hunchback, "Why should I spare others? I was not spared. No one was ever kind to me."

"Of course, it's nonsense," Kikin would reply.

At the thought of Kikin, Bikoff took up a broom-handle and knocked on the ceiling. Two minutes later, the door opened without a sound, and the little hunchback entered. His crooked legs seemed to get tangled in themselves as he made his way across the room. He resembled a corkscrew.

"Well, what did he say?" asked Kikin, blinking his eyes.

"I suppose I've got to die."

Kikin passed his hand over his yellow, hairless face:

"He may be mistaken?"

"No. I feel it myself."

"But you're not old?"

"Oh, no. But if there's no help for it, why make a fuss? I'm a soldier. But what about my money—my property?"

He poured out tea. Kikin made a scuffling noise on the floor, and said with a sigh: "According to the law, your property will go to your nephew Jakov Somoff."

"He's only a distant relative!" Bikoff growled. His anger was intensified by the sharp pain in his side. "I don't know what he's like. I haven't laid eyes on him more than five times in my life."

"Yes, but that's the law——"

"The law—nonsense!" Bikoff ground his teeth and swore.

"Well, if you feel that way, leave it to charity," advised Kikin.

"No, no, not that. I'm not going to sow my grain among the rocks."

"Not much fun in that, it's true."

After some discussion and reflection, Bikoff authorized the hunchback to ask the nephew to come and see him next day.

"I'll see what sort of animal he is."

Jakov Somoff arrived the following evening. As he entered the room, he bowed respectfully, and without even offering his hand, muttered:

"How do you do?"

His voice, though not loud, was high-pitched and strident. The words somehow sounded profound: they were not perfunctory. He was slightly built, of medium height; his light-blue eyes shone softly out of his weather-beaten face. A lock of flaxen hair stuck out curiously above one ear, and a light moustache curled beneath a rather large nose. There was something strong, clean, attractive about him that struck Bikoff immediately. But he was used to treating strangers with suspicion, and thought to himself, "A stupid face. Very evidently a ladies' man." He then glanced at the young man's clothes: he was poorly dressed in a blue shirt, sail-cloth coat and trousers to match, the lower extremities of which were thrust into high boots. Grunting with pain, and in a matter-of-fact tone, Bikoff questioned his nephew as to what he did? Jakov was nineteen, he was employed as a clerk in the office of

a lumber company; he sang alto in the church choir, and liked fishing and reading. Listening to his uneventful story, Bikoff reflected: "He speaks as if he were at confession. Lying probably. He suspects why I've asked him here and pretends to be a good young man." Suddenly, and against his better judgment, he said, scowling:

"I am dying!"

"Wh—what for?"

"How do you mean, what for? I'm ill." (The boy's an idiot!) Jakov spoke with tender persuasiveness:

"There are cures for all diseases. Carrot juice, for instance. A year ago I was threatened with consumption. My mother, a kind and knowing old lady, advised me to drink a glass of carrot juice the moment I got up in the morning. I was cured—completely." Smiling graciously, he stroked his neck and chest, and Bikoff felt as though he were being soothed. The gnawing pain ceased.

"Well, that may be all right for consumption, but my disease is different."

"But consumption *is* a disease. Really, you must try carrot juice, or horse-radish, mixed with alcohol. Horse-radish is even better. It con-

tains saltpeter and that's the best antidote against every form of decomposition or decay. You put it in brine when you pickle fish to keep it from spoiling. All disease is simply a matter of decay."

The youth *did* speak pleasantly; his manner was agreeable, and Bikoff's suspicions and doubts were forgotten.

"How do you know all this?" he asked, and the young man speaking as to an old friend, told him of his acquaintance with a marvelous fisherman, a fellow of some education who had committed suicide the autumn before.

"Why did he kill himself?"

"Because of an unhappy love affair."

"Foolish to commit suicide for that!"

"He couldn't adapt himself to circumstances."

"Eh?"

"He was a man of fine principles——"

"Hm!" And to himself he mused, "An odd youngster. Talkative. But that's his youth, of course."

Some time had passed during their conversation when Somoff, glancing at the clock on the wall, said it was high time he was going: choir rehearsal. He took leave in a most respectful manner, and went out.

Bikoff lay back on the couch and reflected. Long conversations generally tired him. What was there, after all, worth talking about? It was so easy to see what a man was driving at the moment he began, and one always knew what one wanted of him. But this boy was different. He was modest, he had not even referred to their relationship, never called him uncle, though he must have known he was Bikoff's only living relative. But possibly this shy manner was after all only acting? No, it didn't look like that.

Tired and perspiring, Kikin returned home from the shops where he had gone for hemp, and seated himself by the table.

"Has he been here?"

"Yes."

"Well, what do you think of him?"

"Can't tell yet. There's no saying. He seems friendly and well-disposed."

Pouring out tea for himself, Kikin greedily munched at a piece of bread and a slice of sausage, listening attentively.

"He seems to like cheering people up. But such people are naturally deceitful. I don't trust them. Friendliness is another thing that doesn't appeal to me. God made men to mock at each other."

"That's right," agreed the hunchback, who had been mocked at all his life. "Yes indeed, and the devil sets us against each other like fighting cocks. Man sins and the devil grins. As for God's purpose in all this, no one knows what it is. He's like the police inspector at the theater —watches and keeps still."

Bikoff went on and on in an injured tone, and finally closed his eyes from sheer exhaustion.

"Have you heard anything about Jakov?" he asked.

Kikin, who was spreading honey over his bread, turned his chair toward his friend and answered:

"Titoff, his boss, says he's an industrious lad, but occasionally rather imaginative."

"What's that mean?"

"Titoff could not explain, but I took it to mean that the boy sometimes went to extremes, did things for no particular reason. I inquired of the deacon; *he* has only praise for Jakov. But you can't trust him, he's a friend. They go fishing together. His landlady says he drinks only in company, and the company he keeps are queer people: workmen from Kononoffs, locksmiths, the barber——"

"Well, what do you expect? That he should keep company with the Governor?"

"He never brings women to the house, he keeps his room and his things tidy. She says he's considerate——"

"Considerate?"

"Yes."

"That's because he's young. Well, he doubtless knows you have been investigating, and also why I asked him to come here?"

"I doubt it. I've been very careful, you know."

Bikoff remained silent, thinking.

"Well," he said in conclusion, "it seems the only thing to do. I suppose it must be so. See if you can't find out a little more about him, won't you? And then tell him to come again to see me. I think I forgot to invite him."

With gloomy irritation, he exclaimed:

"Just think what this means to me! I have worked and worked, sinned against my immortal soul, and all—what for? For some fool stranger!"

"Yes, it's a pretty sad state of affairs," agreed the meek little hunchback, blinking his huge round eyes.

The disease seemed to have waited only for the doctor's final decision. Shortly after his

visit, it progressed with alarming rapidity. The pain in Bikoff's side became intolerable, his head swam, every part of his body was racked by the devil of disease.

"How goes it today?" asked Kikin. Bikoff groaned.

"It's hard to die—for the first time. I'm not used to it."

He loved to joke. It helped him, particularly when he was blamed by those whom he had injured. "It is God's will," he used to say to them, "that I have got the better of you."

But of late his sense of humor had deserted him and he only joked from force of habit, and with Kikin, who was used to it. For whole days he lay on his couch, his face to the wall, feeling every moment the energy of his body and brain ebbing away. His head, it seemed, was empty as a bell. One thought only was there, constantly recurring:

"I'm going to die. Why?"

Sometimes, in order to stifle that thought, he tried to recall the almost-forgotten words of a prayer: "God Almighty, save me from hell and from the Evil Spirit, by day and by night. . . ."

But he felt the impotence of these words; they could not reconcile him with God, whose will it

was that he should die before his time. They served only to intensify his grief and prolong his suffering.

Then he would rise and, throwing a gray dressing-gown about his shoulders, walk past the mirror to the blue, fathomless hole that was his window. In passing, the mirror cast back at him the reflection of his gaunt figure like that of a convict, his dark face with the green eyes, now grown dim, and the dishevelled beard. Taking a comb from the table under the mirror he would return to his arm-chair and sit there combing his hair and beard, looking out the window occasionally, gazing at the houses separated one from the other by luxuriant gardens. Strong houses they seemed, destined to live for centuries.

The street was quiet, deserted, and hot. The people were now all in the country; only the porters remained, and they were loafing about the entrances. In the gardens he could hear the chirruping of birds. And still he pondered over the injustice of God's ways. Those houses, for instance, built on deep foundations; those nests built of brick and mortar, seemingly immortal, were built by man, who must die. Man had adorned the world by the labor of his hands, yet man was condemned to perish. Why? The

recipient of the Cross of St. George, Igor Ivanovich Bikoff, merchant, must die an early death. For what crime? Is he a greater sinner than the others? And is death, after all, a punishment for one's sins?

On the evening of Jakov Somoff's next visit, the dying man felt better. His nephew's conversation had diverted his mind from dark thoughts, arousing his curiosity in the lad. He wanted to try to understand him, though he was consumed with envy. This lad would live a long time, in comfort and peace and happiness, existing by means of his, Bikoff's, hard-won fortune. He would live a life of purity—free from sin. How unjust, how hideously absurd!

The conversation was interesting. Bikoff was amazed at the novel turns it would take. The boy curiously combined an unusual intelligence with surprising stupidity. And this prevented his forming a definite opinion of Jakov, and coming to a decision. This he was not anxious to do.

"I wonder if he's naturally stupid, or is it because he is young?"

"To live as others do," he heard his nephew say, "is dull. To live as others do not, is difficult."

"True," Bikoff agreed. "But people are different, aren't they?"

It was vexing to hear this nice-looking boy reply without a protest, yet with a certain obstinacy: "At bottom they are all alike, once you know them thoroughly."

"At bottom? How do you mean?"

"Their ability to calculate the energy of others."

Bikoff said nothing. He stroked his beard, and watched Jakov attentively. His nephew was quite right: he himself was going to live on the energy of others—Bikoff's energy. Did he realize that? If so, he was speaking against his own interests, and in that case he was silly. And if he did not realize it, well—he was also silly. Trying once again to discover just what the boy was like, he said:

"Life, my boy, is war. Its law is simple. Don't be a fool!"

"Quite right. That's the root of all the trouble."

"But you can't eliminate the trouble."

Jakov smiled and was silent. Bikoff thought that the youth's smiles always appeared at the wrong moment. There was even something of-

fensively condescending about them. "He thinks he is wise," thought Bikoff, half closing his eyes. It was likewise unpleasant when Jakov suddenly stopped talking in the middle of a discussion, as if he knew something fundamentally important but would not divulge it, preferring to play with his teaspoon or a button on his coat. Such silences angered the elder man, and one day he shrieked at his nephew:

"Don't you understand when someone is addressing you?"

Politely, almost guiltily, Jakov answered:

"I quite understand, but I don't agree."

"Why not?"

"Because my ideas are different."

"Well, what are your ideas? Tell me! Speak! Argue with me. Why do you sit still and say nothing?"

"I don't like arguing," replied Jakov politely. "I don't know how to argue. I think discussions only show how greatly men disagree among themselves."

"So you think men ought never to talk?"

The boy said nothing, but went on with his argument: "Men discuss not in order to find the truth, but to conceal it. The great simple

truths are already established: be like children, love your neighbor. It is not right to argue against truths like that."

"Quite cracked!" thought Bikoff. He laughed bitterly and the laughter increased his pain.

"So you think we can live like children, do you, and love our neighbors as ourselves? But only a moment ago you agreed that life was war, and yet—See here, boy, that won't go."

But Jakov went on, in no wise disconcerted by his uncle's sarcasm:

"All the same, there is no other way to do away with life's miseries, and we ought to direct all our thoughts to that end."

"To what end?"

"To live simply—like children."

"But, you foolish boy, children are the naughtiest little pests on earth. Don't you realize that? Have you ever noticed them fighting—like little animals!"

Again Jakov smiled and was silent. Bikoff wanted to scold him, but checked himself because of the sharp pain in his side:

"Well, never mind then. You may go now. I'm tired out."

He sat down by the window, watching the flame-colored clouds reddening above the tree-

tops. He began to think again: "what a queer lad. He's got jelly in his head instead of brains. He's slippery. You can't get hold of him. He won't give you a chance. Good Lord! Problems and puzzles everywhere. The boy eats slowly—a bad sign: only sluggards eat slowly. And not much; only small bites; the way high-born gentlemen eat. Chews for a long while, like an old man. His teeth are strong and healthy. And he's so thoughtful—as though he had anything to think about! At his age! He walks slowly, too. As if he were thinking, not walking on the earth. Looks somewhat like a girl. If it weren't for that shock of hair he would look exactly like a woman.

"To live like children! The fool! Try and do it once!

"But maybe, after all, he's only a soft-hearted youngster, who wasn't flogged often enough when he was a child. His heart isn't hardened. He's young, and still hopes to go through life without hurting other people, without being hurt himself, without sin? A fine idea—but scarcely practicable."

He recalled his own hard life, and began to feel a great pity for himself; there was even a little left over for Jakov. "He must know,"

thought Bikoff, "that it's hard to live differently from other men, that a life without sin is like bread without butter. A man enjoys a soft bed. . . . Jakov's a nice boy. . . . He has a few drops of the Bikoff blood in his veins."

The moment Kikin arrived, Bikoff began scoffing:

"Well, my friend, my heir presumptive is not very bright. Rather stupid, as a matter of fact. Says we ought all to live like children. Did you ever hear that before?"

"It says so in the Bible," the hunchback ventured timidly.

"What is in the Bible?"

"That—what you said. Christ——"

Bikoff grunted and, putting his hand to his side, snarled:

"Christ was the son of God, and I am the son of Ivan Bikoff, a peasant. There's a heap of difference, eh? Christ never bothered about getting hemp; he didn't live among people like us." With growing irritation, he pounded his clenched fist on the arm of his chair:

"If you're going to live as Christ did, take off your coat and boots and go around like that, in a cassock. And cut off your hair, see?"

The excitement had exhausted him. His face

contracted, he was silent. A moment later he turned on Kikin:

"You, too, talking about Christ! What has He to do with a hunchback? D'ye hear me? Fine bird you are, singing away, with me on my death bed. Christ did not know of this kind of thing!"

Kikin cautiously remarked: "In Gethsemane Christ complained of *His* fate."

"Aha! I remember! Here you are. An early death was bitter, even to Him. But I am a man. . . ."

With a groan of pain, he sank back into his chair, stretched out his feet and began to whimper:

"What are we going to do about it, Kikin? What's to become of all my property? This is ridiculous: I've worked hard and sinned to accumulate a fortune. *Was* it only to throw it all away in the end?" He went on and on, piteously, angrily, his hand outstretched, while Kikin listened in silence, his fingers playing over his twisted knee.

"On the other hand," he was saying, "if you don't leave it either to Jakov or to charity, it reverts to the state."

Bikoff chuckled:

"As though I'd been sentenced to hard labor and had my goods confiscated!"

"Exactly. That's the situation."

"Fine situation, what?"

"Yes. It looks hopeless."

They were both silent for a while, thinking of a way out of the difficulty. Kikin at length suggested that Jakov be asked to come to Bikoff's home to live in order that the two might become better acquainted, and Jakov be given a chance to learn the ways of life, to realize the obligations put upon men by the possession of property. Bikoff agreed.

. . . . . .

Torrents of rain lashed the window panes, the wind sobbed loudly, the strange twilight in the street was gashed by sudden forks of lightning. The room was illumined occasionally by blue-gray spurts of light from the street. The potted flowers on the window-sill looked as if they were suddenly gathered up, with everything else in the room, and carried toward the dimly seen door at the end of the room.

There was a blazing fire in the Dutch stove, and Igor Bikoff was seated in front of it toasting his feet. Warm, reddish ribbons of reflected light ran up and down the length of his dressing-

gown, now and then touching the beard, leaving the face in deep shadow. It was a blind face, and the eyes were closed.

Kikin, a huddled mass, sat on a low foot-stool, his hands folded over his chest. His eyes peered out from under his heavy brow in the direction of Jakov who, leaning against the stove, spoke slowly and precisely as though reciting a fairy tale:

"The more property there is accumulated," said Jakov, "the greater the envy of other people. The poor who see about them the immense fortunes of the rich——"

"Hm!" Bikoff slowly opened his eyes, and Kikin, with a sigh, poked at the fire, which threw off sputtering sparks on to the metal plate below the stove. Bikoff ran one foot over the sparks. "How wrong it all is!" he thought. "How unpleasant." He looked at Kikin. Kikin's face now looked like an old leather ball, and his short stubby gray hair like plush. His teeth were like a toad's. His ears especially diabolical. Jakov, on the other hand, resembled a picture painted on white tiles. He was possibly a little too elegantly dressed, in that new suit of his. Not a very pleasant spectacle.

"Does that mean," asked Bikoff sarcastically,

"that the poor will ultimately decide to rob the rich? Is that your idea?"

"Of course, there should be an equal division of wealth——"

"Oh, indeed?" said Bikoff. "That's not right, my boy!"

"Millions of people believe it."

"Have you counted them?"

"The masses are beginning to get angry. That much is true," said Kikin, staring into the fire. "Everybody is discontented."

"You hold your tongue," ordered Bikoff. "Not another word from you!"

Jakov had not been two months in his uncle's home, and Kikin was already echoing the words of the younger man, even supporting his ideas. He seemed to have found in Jakov his new master.

"Oh, humanity! Humanity!" Once more Bikoff was lost in meditation: A silly boy, Jakov, or else a crafty fellow. He is soft and gentle and beguiling; he gets people to agree with him that, somehow, the root of all evil is wealth. An ugly idea, a perverted notion. It doesn't seem to fit in with Jakov's character. He cannot be altogether sincere. Then why pretend? He

knows now that he will be a rich man when his uncle dies, and he certainly doesn't look like one who would associate with paupers. He wouldn't give away his riches to the poor. He acts like a man accustomed to rule. He respects things, he can save money, he's tidy and clean. The moment he came he got after the porter, put the yard in order, went over the house from top to bottom, even caught the clerk stealing. No, he has no liking for beggars. All the same, he's queer. What is he, really? That shock of hair! Hm! Perhaps he's talking all this heresy for a purpose, to frighten and irritate the old man, to drive him as soon as possible into the grave!

This troubled Bikoff, and one day he asked the youth point-blank: "Why do you tell me all this rubbish?"

"In order to be clear about things," was the answer.

Jakov opened his eyes wide. Sometimes they were the open eyes of frankness, and sometimes they went dull, looking like the eyes of a blind man. They always did that when he expounded his heresies.

"We must be clear. People must be unanimous on this question of mutual aid——"

"Aid against what?" inquired Bikoff. "Where does all this hatred come from? It's all on the part of the masses themselves."

"People cannot live in continual discord," answered Jakov obstinately. "It is said that we should not sow the wind or we shall reap the tempest. You've got to stifle the ideas of a nation if you want to avoid revolution."

"Lies!" thundered Bikoff angrily.

Day and night he wondered whether Jakov ought to have his property or not, and his preoccupation with this diverted his thoughts from the subject of death. It even seemed at times that his pain was not so great. "A mystifying boy," he said to himself. "Why, every pauper knows that man's strength in the battle of life is wealth, property. Why, even moles know that. . . ."

At night he lay still, thinking, pondering, wondering. Upstairs the others, Jakov and Kikin, were not asleep. He knew that, and could imagine the youth speaking in his accustomed obstinate way, and the hunchback listening. Jakov was of course advocating a change in the laws, trying to limit the authority and power of the Czar. He dares—! The scamp! Such things were discussed cautiously in whispers, dur-

ing the Turkish campaign years ago, and once again on the outbreak of a later war. But it was only the slackers who talked that way. They even wanted to kill the Czar once, but were just too late.

Idiocy! Joshua made war, and then there was David; he was meek enough, writing Psalms —and *he* couldn't avoid fighting. The Orthodox Princes fought the Tartars. St. Alexander Nevsky waged merciless battle with the Swedes. These leaders weren't killed by their own people. Bah! What ignorance!

When he was tired of lying in bed, Bikoff rose and sat in front of his window and watched the stars and the fat womanish face of the moon. How dreary the sky was with its tawdry display of stars! The priest, Father Fyodor, used to say that people didn't sufficiently admire the miraculous splendor of the sky, but he cheated at poker. Bikoff recalled how he had quarrelled with him, saying there was nothing wonderful about the sky, that it reminded him simply of the pitiful mediocrity of humankind. He preferred the sky during the daytime, with the sun showing the naked emptiness of it all. The night is better when there are clouds that conceal the firmament, and make one forget its existence. Man was

created to live on the earth, and when priests seek to entice him away from it, it is as though a bridegroom were suddenly snatched from the arms of his bride to live in the barracks. When Bikoff argued this way the priest would become very angry.

The trees outside were part of the enveloping darkness; they looked as if they had been dipped in a tar barrel. There was no sound. It was so quiet that one had an insane desire to shriek Fire!

"God Almighty!" muttered Bikoff. "Why do you punish me this way? Am I a greater sinner than the others?" What of his friends? Why, they are far worse than he, covetous, envious, crafty. *He* has a conscience, that is why he has no real friends. He has lived his whole life in solitude, striving and toiling to make a comfortable home where he might live with a kind and beautiful wife. It is pleasant to have at one's side a handsome, healthy woman, to dress her as you would dress a doll, take her out walking or driving, boast of her finery. And her soft smooth body—the envy of others. How sweet! Half-closing his eyes, he scrutinized the heavy furniture of his room, now almost invisible in the

gathering darkness. With what high hopes had he bought every article. Everything had a meaning for him. He lived among his things like a man in his own fortress. All would be taken out of this room. After he went, it would be like a coffin.

Why? Oh, God!

Upstairs, Jakov's voice was heard, up in Kikin's garret. He was elaborating, spinning out his heresies, like some sort of machine. "He's stubborn certainly, and that's not altogether a fault, only his notions are childish. When I was young, though, I didn't know what I wanted. Luckily for him, he's my only possible heir." This thought stuck in his mind, and he decided to leave everything to Jakov, but found it necessary to justify this decision to himself. "The boy is modest and sober. He will become sharper when he has wealth." Strangely enough, however, when he thought of Jakov not as his heir but simply as a stranger, he liked him better, was actually pleased with him. He even felt the boy had some trace of reason in his mad ideas: Jakov's unfaltering faith—in *something*—was contagious. He felt a sensation not unlike envy as he listened to the winged words of the boy and noted how they formed into ideas. "Yes, clever:

he's a bird whose song is sweet enough, but if he wore my feathers he wouldn't be quite so gay. He has an easy time of it, the young devil!"

What Bikoff enjoyed most were Jakov's stories about his employer Titoff, a queer fellow and a drunkard. He would roar with laughter at these tales. It was agreeable to picture his enemy in ridiculous situations, and pleasant to see how observant Jakov was. His heir was at least keenly aware of the infirmities of other men.

"You've got a good eye," he would say, "and that is useful. It's always well to see on which leg a man limps."

Then Jakov would proceed with his recital:

"When Titoff feels the fit coming on, he sends for the engineer Baltriski and for ten days the two of them drink. They send the servant Christopher out into the garden at night and have him bury about twenty bottles of wine here and there in the ground. Early next morning they go with canes, as if they were hunting for mushrooms. They look for the bottles, and when they find one exclaim gleefully, 'Here's a white one!' That bottle is soon drunk, out in the summer-house, and then they look for another. So it goes, all day long, hunting for mushrooms and drinking the wine. Sometimes they begin

with liqueurs. By the end of their bout Titoff is so drunk that he gets down on all fours like Nebuchadnezzar in Rubinstein's opera *The Demon,* and sings

> I am he whom no one loves,
> Cursed by every living thing.

Baltriski, meantime, is lying on the ground trying in vain to pull another bottle out of the earth with his teeth. He whimpers like a child, wondering where his strength has gone to."

And Bikoff would laugh long and loud, in spite of the pain it caused him, and Jakov would add:

"You are right to laugh, still I pity the poor fellows. Powerful men, both of them, who could move mountains, but make no proper use of their strength. It is sometimes said that people are greedy, but I don't find them so. People are not greedy for work——"

"You're young, that's why you don't see much," said Bikoff, but only because he wished to contradict the thought in his own mind. "I can't make the lad out at all," he thought. "Sometimes he talks business like a business genius: people *have* no greediness for work. And yet there's something out of the way, absurd, in his feeling sorry for his master because the master

doesn't do good work. He believes in honest labor, but if things were organized on that basis and everyone devoted all his energies to it, all these childish ideas of his would disappear."

"You're hard to understand, Jakov," said Bikoff, rather sullenly. "There's something you haven't thought through to the end."

Jakov was silent and lowered his eyes, trying to smooth down the shock of hair sticking out from the side of his head, but without the least success.

. . . . . .

From his window Bikoff watched the sudden scurrying of a crowd in the street.

"What are they so excited about?" he inquired of the hunchback, whose face had immediately begun to brighten. The little man who had all his life suffered ridicule from others, now seemed to walk more erect, his feet were steadier. Blinking excitedly and pulling up his creased trousers, he began to relate a most extraordinary tale: "Really," he said, "it's a remarkable incident. Everybody in town's mixed up in this scandal, the Board of Trade, the nobles, even the priests. What a remarkable thing, Igor Ivanovich——"

"Wait a moment: the Governor's in town?"

"No."

"The Czar is still alive?"

"Yes."

"And well?"

The hunchback smiled a grim and unfamiliar smile:

"What do you want to know?"

"Fool!"

Jakov would doubtless have given a better account of the events, but he had asked leave to go to Moscow. He had been there, as a matter of fact, for the past two weeks.

The excitement in the street was now at its highest pitch. It was like Easter-tide.

"What's the matter?" asked Bikoff.

"You see, the people are demanding——"

"Stop your babbling! What people? The peasants?"

"The peasants, too——"

"Well, what then?"

"They are asking for land."

"Asking whom?"

"Well, you see—" began the hunchback and went on talking nonsense, wriggling in his chair like a lobster in a frying pan.

"People are—you see—because of. They're taking an account of things—" He rubbed his hands with gleeful satisfaction, and a fiendish

joy shone in his eyes. "A general offensive has begun, against everything, against the life we all lead. People are beginning to understand that the old existence cannot go on. . . ."

"Old existence? What do you mean, you hump-backed fool?"

"This existence. They're all talking very openly, as if everyone had been asleep and had just waked up. The past is only a dream, by God! And now it's revolution." Turning his hairless and contorted face to Bikoff, he sat down beside him, his coat twisted round his hump.

Bikoff thought with scorn what a filthy little beggar this was.

"This is a real event, Igor Ivanovich. Everybody's out in the street, crowding round the town hall."

"Go to hell!" . . . Kikin had gone out.

"A worthless worm! But what he says makes me anxious. I don't like him around. I'll give him money and send him away. Now that Jakov's here I don't need him any longer."

Toward evening on a particularly rainy day Jakov returned from Moscow. He was very solemn as he came in for tea, and behaved as if he were taking communion. The shock of hair

stuck out straighter than usual, his eyebrows were contracted over his eyes, which expressed extreme preoccupation. His voice was deeper and hoarser. He sat down by the table, pushing his chair with his foot, and as he did so he seemed not quite so timid as before. Bikoff felt that something was wrong.

"Well, how is Moscow?" he inquired.

Jakov replied in a rather loud voice, like a witness in the stand under oath to speak nothing but the truth. He spoke a long time and avoided answering his uncle's question.

He's lying, thought Bikoff, and he's trying to frighten me. He was uneasy all the while, and kept his eye on Kikin, who sat squirming in his chair, evidently only waiting to put in a word. "They're plotting against me," thought Bikoff.

Jakov was relating the most extraordinary things: all classes, it seemed, had suddenly risen up to demand an improvement in living conditions, and were now fighting each other.

"Well, and what will come of it all?" asked Bikoff, suspiciously and angrily. Jakov reflected for a moment, sighed, and said:

"There will be trouble, unless we all get together and agree what is for the best. I am sorry to have to tell you something that may upset you,

but it looks as though a real revolution were coming."

"You lie!" yelped Bikoff. "A real revolution? Who will start it? You're taking advantage of my illness, trying to frighten me, to kill me. . . ."

He pounded his fist on the table, rattling the tea-cups. His eyes started from his head.

"I don't believe in the end of the world. I'm not afraid. I'm afraid of nothing, so long as I'm alive. I'm master of my own property, you hear!" He stopped suddenly and fell back into his chair. Jakov was blushing.

"Well," said the nephew, "I may as well tell you the whole truth. You suspect me of having designs on your money. Konstantin Dmitrivich here told me that, too. You are quite mistaken, however, such an idea is an insult to me. I don't need your money. I refuse to accept it. If you like, I'll put that in writing. Today. I came here to live with you because you're lonely and sick. I knew you were better than many other men: you were at least frank and outspoken. For instance, you might easily have ruined Becker the school-teacher, and the two Kasimirsky girls, but you didn't. This is why I respected you and came here. But from now on, I can't stay. Good-bye!"

He ended almost in a whisper, coughed, rose from his chair, and went to the door, adding: "Of course, I am very grateful to you. I very much regret——"

"Wait!" shouted Bikoff, drawing tight about him the belt of his dressing-gown. "Wait! Don't lose your temper."

But Jakov had already gone. Bikoff stood up, still clutching the end of his belt, and shouted at the hunchback:

"Run! Catch him!"

Kikin jumped up and disappeared through the door.

"Well!" exclaimed Bikoff, "What do you think of that!" He listened eagerly for sounds on the stairs. Jakov's refusal of his money had taken his breath away, but on hearing about Becker and the Kasimirsky girls—well! "I respected you"—hm! I "insulted" him!

Jakov was brought back shortly after.

"You're a crank," said Bikoff, a little ashamed. "Why fly into a rage that way? Come here. Sit down. My property belongs to you. I'm not only willing it to you, it's yours according to law."

Jakov refused to sit.

"I shan't say another word about the will," he

answered, holding tight to the back of his chair.

"Is that so? You positively refuse?"

"Yes. All inheritances may soon be abolished by law."

"What!—Sit down.—Don't be angry with a sick man. You can't be deprived of your inheritance. That's the law."

"The law ought to be changed," said Jakov, sitting down at last. "All our miseries come from inheritances."

"Very well, then, let us abolish the inheritance," agreed Bikoff, jokingly, his eyes glued on his nephew. Jakov looked ill: his girlish face seemed thinner than usual, his lips bluer. His eyes had dark circles round them; he was sullen.

For some days Bikoff lived in a state of elation, filled with solemn excitement, enjoying the friendly solicitude of Kikin and Jakov. He was growing steadily weaker; a nursing sister had to be called in. She was tall and thin: a woman of few words. Her face was pock-marked and her eyes colorless. Bikoff was sufficiently observant to note the preoccupied expression on Kikin's face, and the signs of lassitude on Jakov's. The latter came and went often during the day and spoke with the utmost circumspection. "They're

trying to spare me," thought Bikoff. "I suppose I'm pretty near the end." But the idea of death frightened him less than it had, though he thought how pleasant it would have been to live a bit longer: Jakov was agreeable and Kikin a good fellow after all. "They understand me at last, they can read my soul. As for my nephew I think I've convinced him of the importance of property. He used to think it ought to be divided up among the poor. What strange beings men are!"

Turning to the sister he asked, "What's happening in town, eh?" He wanted to get at the truth of what Kikin and Jakov had so imperfectly related.

"They are still rioting," said the sister sleepily. She was always sleepy, yawning at all times and making the sign of the cross as she did so. Sleepiness seemed to reside in those dull and faded eyes of hers, even in her noiseless cat-like tread.

There was shooting in the town. It began on a Saturday and continued far into the gray rainy dawn of Sunday. The first shots were heard in the far distance, muffled by the soft rain. Bikoff listened. The shots sounded like a crow pecking with its sharp beak on an iron roof.

"What's the knocking?" he asked, waking up the sister. She listened, lifting her head slowly like a snake, her eyes turned in the direction of the window.

"I don't know. Do you want your medicine?"

"Hush!"

The sharp crack of rifles was now more distinct. It sounded like the ticking of a counting board under the deft fingers of a skilled accountant.

"It sounds like firing," Bikoff muttered. He was an old soldier, and he was sure. "Go upstairs and wake the others."

The sister rose, lazily, tucked her hair up under her kerchief and disappeared as if blown through the door by a wind. Bikoff sat on the edge of the bed, smoothing his hair and beard with trembling hands. "They're shooting, the dirty dogs! What are they shooting at?"

The sister returned shortly, and almost shrieked, in that silly thin voice of hers: "They're shooting—at your roof!"

"You fool!" answered Bikoff. "They're only blanks!"

"No, no!"

"Be quiet! It's manœuvres—practice. It's

against the law to use real bullets within the town limits."

"No, no, they're real! Lord above!" She rushed to the window and threw it open. The sound was now unmistakable. Bikoff heard rifles and revolvers. A bomb exploded. The window-panes rattled. Lights shone in the street. The sister, making the sign of the cross, knelt down in the middle of the floor moaning,

"God, oh God!"

Kikin appeared in the doorway, standing on tip-toe, his figure lighted by the thin rays of the lamp.

"What is this anyway?" asked Bikoff. "And where is Jakov?"

"Gone."

"Where? When?"

Taking off his cap he replied guiltily: "I warned him, Igor Ivanovich, not to go, not to get mixed up in it. It's true, they deceived him——"

"Who deceived?"

"The state, the government. Jasha said to them, 'No, comrades, that won't do. It's not right!' He's gone off with the Kononovskys."

Bikoff seemed to be clutching at something; it was as though he were being lashed with a

whip. He stuck his feet out of bed and growled:

"My dressing-gown! Take me to the window! You—woman—come here!"

The sister got up, went to the window, and looking out, made a gesture of desperation:

"You may do what you like. I'm going home!" But she did not go. She crouched there by the window. Kikin meantime hurried Bikoff into his dressing-gown.

"Something might come through that window," he said.

"Be quiet! You dirty hypocrite!" Shots again sounded in the street. There was pounding at the gate below, axes could be distinctly heard hewing away at heavy doors, and a woman's voice crying out, "Run around through the garden!"

Bikoff had reached the window. He was in time to see a black horse gallop swiftly by, ridden by a man who seemed glued to his back. The animal, he could see, was lame. Three shadows approached the gate, the last dragging a long heavy beam, the end of which scraped over the cobble stones and caught against the pillars.

"Thieves," Bikoff decided, but within him he

felt a strange emptiness in which all his sensations seemed to echo. Another shot—the bullet shook the leaves on the tree just outside the window.

"A ricochet!" Close by his side he heard the feeble voice of Kikin:

"You'd better stand back from the window."

He pushed the hunchback away.

"A revolution, you say?"

"It's the workingmen who are revolting."

"And what of Jasha? Is he in this?"

"He's with the Kononovsky men."

"Go and call him," ordered Bikoff, waving his hand out the window. "Tell him to come here immediately. You devil, why didn't you tell me the truth about this?"

"Jasha told you——"

"Go! If Jasha is killed I'll make your life a hell on earth!"

Bikoff was trembling violently. He stood magnificently erect, like an old soldier at attention, just inside the window. Kikin went out.

"I'm going home," wailed the sister. Bikoff sat down heavily, though he still kept his eyes on the window. There was not so much shooting now, but outside something heavy had evidently fallen against the gate. Boards cracked

—what did it all mean? And those telegraph wires—how tight they were! There, they are trembling. Then he heard the tramping of feet, and crackling of wood, and a voice saying: "Take off the gates! There are barrels in the yard. Here, now!"

Bikoff's barrels!

"Tie the wires to the lantern! Across the street there! Knock down the lamp-posts! My leg! Look out, you devil!"

He could make out Jakov's voice in the din. What was he doing? Bikoff did not want to think about that. Leaning again on the window sill, he said to himself: "He's protecting me. He won't let them enter."

The sister was now running back and forth imploring God to save her. "Sit down!" thundered Bikoff, "or I'll thrash you. And be quiet!" He threatened her with the stick he used to knock on the ceiling as a signal to Kikin.

Outside he heard a sharp command: "Aim at the priest!"

The dawn began to appear at length, and the black shadows of moving men became a little more clearly defined. There were over a hundred in the street, mostly crowded together just

to the left of Bikoff's house. They had barricaded the street, using telegraph-poles which they dragged down the street by their tangled wires. From a nearby yard one man was dragging bales of hay to the accompaniment of a chorus of shouts. The windows of all the houses meantime stared like the eyes of the blind. Behind them you could just perceive an occasional shadow moving. From the distance a bugle sounded.

"Stand to one side!" somebody shouted in a deep bass voice. Something cracked and screeched, and a heavy thud resounded—stones falling in a heap.

"They're wrecking something," said Bikoff turning to the sister as if he wanted to question her. "You hear that? They're breaking things to atoms!"

The early morning air chilled him. He wrapped himself more tightly in his dressing-gown and leaned far out of the window. He had caught sight of Jakov carrying a crow-bar over one shoulder; he was now running toward Bikoff's gate. Behind him were seven others armed with rifles and axes. One of them had a large wooden beam. They pounded at the gate,

while Jakov leaped over the wall into the yard, as lightly as a cat, and shouted back to his companions:

"Here are the barrels!"

Incredible. A horrible dream. Bikoff could not believe in the reality of what he saw.

"The thieves!" It was the sister who had thus brought him back to himself.

The gate was flung open, and the men rushed into the grounds.

"Get out!" shouted Bikoff, with all his remaining strength: "Get out, you dirty dogs! Jasha, kick them out!"

Jakov looked up and cried: "We've been deceived, uncle. The people are being massacred!"

"Igor Ivanovich," came the voice of the hunchback, "come away from the window!"

One of the gates fell into the yard with a heavy crash. The men dragged it out into the street, and returned to unhinge the other. The barrels were then rolled out through the gap in the wall. Kikin seemed to be everywhere in the crowd, hurrying back and forth.

Bikoff, dumb with rage, took up a potted cactus and flung it out into the midst of the crowd. It was a bad shot, hitting no one. He turned to the sister, crying: "Give me the other flower-pots,

the chairs, anything!" The woman was terrified at his savage tone, and immediately gave him what was nearest to hand. Bikoff, groaning with pain, threw one thing after another out into the crowd, cursing and yelling: "I'll kill you, Jasha! You monster, Koska!"

Then someone fired a shot at the window. The bullet struck the chandelier, which fell in pieces to the floor. The sister shrieked and fell. Bikoff turned savagely at her:

"Bah! You're still alive, aren't you? Give me something else to throw, do you hear?"

There was more shooting outside, and a voice could be heard saying: "They've gone on!"

Bikoff saw his nephew crawl back into the yard, dragging one foot behind him. An instant later a detachment of soldiers emerged out of the mist, with fixed bayonets.

"Surrender!" shouted the leader. "Lie down there!" Some attempted to run, and the soldiers shot at them. Bikoff broke into wild laughter. Leaning far out the window, he stretched his hand out into the foggy mist, and roared:

"See that fellow over there! He's crawling! That one! The hunchback trying to hide behind the barrel!"

The sister meantime had opened the other win-

dow, and was shouting, "Kill them! Chase them away!"

A stray bullet caught Bikoff in the chin. He shot straight up into the air and then sank in a huddled heap across the chairs he had intended to throw out the window.

THE REHEARSAL

This amusing incident occurred during the rehearsal of the fourth act of the famous drama, *The Path of the Chosen.* It all began when the director, exhausted by heroic but fruitless efforts to initiate his players into the inner meaning of the play, finally addressed them in a tone which could not conceal his vexation:

"Let us rest a few minutes, ladies and gentlemen!" Pulling his watch from his pocket and scrutinizing the dial with his weak eyes, he walked up to the footlights and with an air of defiance glared at the empty orchestra seats. A tiny red light over one of the doors flickered pathetically through the blackness. Beyond the door the blackness was impenetrable, fathomless.

The director was considered a modern: to him the players were simply instruments in an orchestra under his leadership; he despised them as individuals. He wore a velvet blouse and smelled of scented soap. He was small and narrow-chested; his legs were thin and his knees knotted. He had a large head crowned with a

mane of wavy hair. His nose was long and his bluish clean-shaven countenance wore the expression of a man who was doomed to spend his life among stupid folk. His thick red lips tightly pressed together, his eyes half closed, he looked about at everything and everybody, and in addressing his company it was as though he were proclaiming his woes to the entire world:

"No, no, that is not the way to do it!"

A dramatic critic, his sworn enemy, declared that the director had been guilty of a mistaken interpretation in his production of Pushkin's *Miserly Knight.*

"I don't deny that Andrei Stepanovich Pushkin was a man of great talent," he had conceded.

The director looked like a gnome, silently invoking the spirits of darkness to come to his aid. In the dim twilight of the stage four actors were discernible: the leading lady, a poor suffering woman who was dissatisfied with life; the comedian, her husband, a man endowed with "sound reason," and of course, mean and vulgar; the soubrette, a girl destined to create "New things," and the leading man, a "pioneer." They stood there surrounded by stage rocks, jutting out here and there in unimaginable confusion. A round table stood among the rocks,

and the leading man was sitting upon it, whistling and writing something with a pencil in the manuscript containing his rôle. The stage somehow reminded one of a bag inflated with air. The dusty atmosphere reeked of gum, paint and some other disagreeable odor, possibly the musty remnants of countless heroes and heroines killed by dramatists in their attempts to amuse the audience. From the silent darkness of the orchestra rose the mingled odor of perfume, dust, perspiration, shoeblacking and wet leather.

The comedian's voice was now heard. He spoke slowly and with a lazy intonation. He was a Realist. To this sort of delivery the director had a particular aversion.

"Ye-es. Very fine. Well done. Imagination. . . ."

Sitting on the edge of one of the absurd stage rocks, the comedian was rolling a cigarette. His tobacco pouch was carefully spread over his knees, on which he also balanced some cigarette papers and his holder.

"Don't you like the play?" inquired the leading lady, biting her lips and then scrutinizing them with the aid of a small hand mirror.

"You know, Aniuta, the only thing I really like is fishing. The play? Well, the words are a

little different from the words in other plays: they lisp, like words spoken by children. In a way they are nicer, a little more pathetic than the good old savory Russian words. Otherwise, well, it's the plot of Adam and Eve all over again: you, Aniuta, must suffer and love, and I as your husband am forced to find food and wine and clothing to conceal your nakedness. Grouski is the serpent (the seducer, that is); he must awaken your soul to a "new" life and lead you off over the *Path of the Chosen.* There's no getting away from the subject. We're like mice in a trap, waiting for death to come and thrust us into the bottomless pit. There is Lidochka walking about nervously, waiting for her turn to begin another little drama."

"Leave me alone!"

"I would gladly do so, my child, but I cannot," the comedian went on, continuing to play the buffoon. Lidochka was really quite nice-looking: the men saw to it that she never forgot that, and she did her best to keep them of that opinion. She was only twenty, found life pleasant and agreeable, and of course never for a moment thought that in her life any material could be found for a new drama. To have suggested as much would have offended her deeply.

Her rôle appeared easy to her, all she had to do was to fall in love with the hero. The indifference with which her elders regarded this play was irritating: why this discussion when all she needed to do was to act it in such a way as to arouse the admiration of the audience?

"You are always philosophizing, Ivan," she said as she continued to examine her face, putting powder on her nose. Some time since, a certain critic had likened her face to a piece of antique marble. This had pleased her, and ever since she had striven to give to her little nipple-shaped nose, the famous antique hue. She rejoiced in a pair of dark and "fatal" eyes. These she was accustomed to consider unnecessarily wicked and cruel, and often closed them in pathetic scenes, so that her countenance actually did resemble stone. As for her voice, a well-known critic had once proclaimed to the world that "in the rôle of Medea, Rostovtzeva's voice has the meditative rustle of the medlar tree." Off-stage she spoke with a slight nasal drawl in a most languorous manner. She thought that such mannerisms (like certain perfumes) were the most effective means of arousing the emotions of her admirers.

"Yes," continued the comedian, "I do philoso-

phize." He lighted a cigarette and inhaled deeply. It was also true that he liked to fish. Fishing, more than any other pursuit, allows a man to forget who he is, where he is, and what he is. True happiness is found in art and science, both of which prevent one from thinking of other things. The comedian had lived half a century without noticing it, and during that time had unconsciously acquired the habit of pondering over the very simplest matters, but at the same time he had complicated things by talking to everyone about his dangerous mania, particularly about his aspiration to discover the deep meaning of things, indispensable for an actor, in every manifestation of life.

"Yes," he repeated once more, "I philosophize. What else is one to do? You know, Aniuta, lately when I have been acting, the orchestra out there has reminded me of a pot of caviar, the middle of which has been eaten. Some has been left around the edges.—Is the author coming?"

The director, speaking over his shoulder, answered with the precision of a pupil reading out of a grammar book: "The author has promised to visit us at half-after one."

"Confound the author!" It was the leading man who thus suddenly joined the conversation,

pronouncing the words distinctly like a line of verse. He jumped up from the table and, threatening the encircling darkness with his golden pencil, added in a tone of conviction:

"If I were one of the lawmakers I would introduce a law against all writers who spread gloom, and have them sentenced to retire to a monastery where they would be forbidden to write not only novels and plays but even letters, until they got over their gloominess. You are right, Vania, this play is sheer nonsense. I am sick of the pompous author. Creatoroff, he calls himself! It sounds theological. His real name is Podorojnikoff!"

"Pirojnikoff!" [1] corrected the soubrette.

"Pardon me! That makes it still more vulgar. They say he is impossibly haughty, a glutton and a rounder; also stingy. They tell the most extraordinary tales about his miserliness——"

The leading lady frowned and made a warning gesture with one hand. She knew these stories had been somewhat exaggerated, but she had reasons for remaining silent and allowing the leading man the utmost freedom in painting the author in lurid colors. He continued without restraint.

[1] A kind of Russian pastry.

Noiselessly walking back and forth on one side of the stage, Lidochka smiled to herself. She knew all about the unhappy love affair of the leading lady and the author, she had even witnessed its epilogue: *she*, the other, was an anemic little youngster, shy, absent-minded, treading the earth like a tight-rope walker.

"Creatoroff!" the leading man thundered, half-closing his eyes with an ironic grin and flourishing his right hand, "what affectation there is in that name! Eh, Ivan?" And the comedian laughed approvingly his fat artificial laugh, as the other continued in a suave baritone: "If your name is Creatoroff, then *create* a happy part for me."

The director inquired in the tone of an examiner: "What do you call happiness?"

"What the devil do you mean? That's not hard to understand. Even a sparrow knows that."

The leading man would not have been what he was if he had lacked ambition: indeed he regarded his ambition as quite commensurate with his ability. His companions, however, thought he rather overrated that. The director he deemed an unintelligent, pernicious little fellow, whose chief function in the world was to curb the artist's

inspirations. Walking up to him, he extended one arm as though holding a sword in his hand, and began to recite:

"I am tired of having always to play the same part, the part of a sufferer. Whether in Hamlet or Cyrano, Franz Moor or Fedia in *The Live Corpse,* I am eternally suffering. . . ."

"You are at perfect liberty to sell gents' furnishings if you like," replied the director.

"Your facetiousness reminds me of the jokes one hears behind the counter. I speak seriously. Both as artist and man I feel I am being debased by the rôles I am called upon to play. To suffer daily for seven hundred and fifty roubles a month. . . ."

"And what about me?" asked the comedian, "I am called upon to act the rôle of a fool!" With a wave of the hand he scattered over the stage the flying sparks from his lighted cigarette, and made one of those grimaces which before the public had brought him fame.

"I exhibit myself to the public for their amusement. You," this to the leading man, "have nothing to worry about: am I not the greater buffoon of the two! But foolishness never worried anyone except my friend Lukin, the geography teacher, and even he is not very much worried,

except by his profession, and not because he thinks foolishness an unmitigated evil."

At this "realistic" and vulgar tirade the director only shrugged his shoulders. The leading man took up the litany:

"*The Path of the Chosen* indeed! And we men and women of talent are forced to tread this path for the sake of a pack of stupid people who smack their lips watching us torture one another, greedily awaiting the last gasp of our exhausted souls. . . ."

"A circus!" the comedian added. "Yes, you're right, Nisha, we're a lot of acrobats. And the audience *is* like a pot of caviar. . . . Suppose the play were withdrawn?"

"Isn't it time to go on with the rehearsal?" asked Lidochka, but no one paid the least attention to her.

"I asked Lukin one day, 'Anton, do you believe in reason?' 'Of course,' he said, 'that's my business.' What nonsense! What has a geography teacher to do with reason?"

"What bores they are," thought Lidochka. "What tiresome people!" She was a clever little woman who realized that the stage was simply a place where actors had to pretend, and that the more sincerely they pretended the greater was

their success. The actor walked, as it were, on borrowed feet, and repeated borrowed words. But after all it was like "real" life: there, too, it was necessary to pretend in order to achieve success, and that was not difficult. The great lesson was to learn to take more than one received. She recalled an amusing thing that was once told her by a red-haired student of philology who was in love with her: "The rule of the excluded third is that one is either a human being or not a human being, since there cannot be a third alternative."

"You little fool," she had wanted to tell him, "I am not a human being to you, I am a woman. To the public I am an actress and a woman, and only to myself a human being. But this is of no use or interest to anyone, not even to you. As a matter of fact, *I* am that excluded third, the real thing you can never understand, and no one ever will understand."

There were three persons now on the stage, forming a triangle in close formation. From this triangle came the following speeches:

"Allow me! Freedom, the artist's religion——"

"The devil you say! I, too, have my religion, and I believe there is a happiness——"

"Your brand of happiness is mean, it's a vulgar sensation——"

"If you like fishing——"

"You shut up, Vania!"

"At twilight, when——"

"I don't eat fish, I don't like it!"

"Creatoroff's idea of freedom is violence!"

"Is that so? Well, let me ask you, what but violence is this tame submission of ours to social conventions?"

"These new plays are not worth a damn——"

"All I ask is the rôle of a happy man. I'll act it to make the whole world weep!"

"I have no doubt it will!" retorted the director.

"Weep with joy and rapture——"

"Hm! I doubt it."

"When I philosophize they all laugh at me," cried the comedian, his voice ringing with mortification and anger. "Do you imagine it's easy for me to smother my soul in the body of another?"

This discussion agitated the leading lady, for she vaguely felt that under it all lay an important truth. It was quite true that to play unfortunate women was wearying. There was enough misery and unpleasantness in life without showing its semblance in the theater. How pleasant it would

be to play a happy woman! She had impersonated the other kind during the greater part of her life of forty-five years, and she was tired of herself; to "smother her soul in the body of another" had for her, too, become a habit. She had almost reached a point where she could not distinguish where acting ended and life began. It often puzzled her to know whether the words she uttered were actually Anna Rostortzeva's or of one of the many heroines she had impersonated. She did not know whether she was sorry for herself in life, or whether she had carried over into life the belated emotions she had assumed the day before in the presence of the audience.

She rather resented the tone the leading man was taking with the author, because she believed it was her right, and hers alone, to abuse him that way, and she was proud of not overdoing it. Meantime the dispute waxed warmer; the leading man had become so sincerely indignant that he actually spoke words of his own, not the dull phrases remembered from his old rôles. It was unnatural. Even the comedian had become intelligent, there was a note of real pathos in his voice. The director alone remained his own pedantic self. At moments it seemed that all three were rehearsing a new play. The leading lady

waited for her entrance cue, and as she waited she called to mind the author as he was twelve years ago.

At that time he was not yet a distinguished figure, though he had reached the zenith of his powers. He dressed in a rather extreme "esthetic" style, prided himself on his huge mane of prematurely gray hair, was adored by all the women, and spoke fascinatingly of the "new" art. The critics were unanimous in their admiration, and the reading public—taking their cue from the critics—found much to admire in his books. A certain patron of the arts, who sold ready-made suits, had said to him that he "rode into literature on a high horse." It was finally discovered that this modern's favorite author was Dickens, his favorite dish veal cutlets with onions, and that he had impressed upon the woman he loved the necessity of reminding him every minute of the day that an artist is equal to God Almighty, not only because he creates worlds, but because he counts upon achieving immortality. He was the object of unceasing care: she must look after his linen, sew buttons on his underclothes, serve his coffee hot at breakfast, and finally see that his days are passed in comfort and peace. Every discordant element

must be kept out of his life. Particularly during the hours of his inspiration it was indispensable that the hurry and confusion of life should be hidden from him. Yes, life with such a man is a great strain upon any woman, monotonous yet full of discordant elements and grave responsibilities.

They had loved each other for almost three years: he in the full measure of his powers, and she almost beyond hers. He was the fourth to whom she had declared he was her "first real love." She recalled the agony with which she had realized, after two years, that he had drained the reservoir of her feelings. At the bottom of that reservoir lay only a thin gray residue of everyday trivialities. A young poetess had appeared upon the scene, plump as a young lamb, with curly hair, the face of a china doll, and a look in her eyes of dumb and sheep-like adoration.

He had explained his fickleness in a manner not uncommon with artists: "An artist," he had declared, "must always be in love, for love is the basis of all art." Feeling ashamed of the way in which he phrased this, he had tried to pass it off as a joke and substituted the coarse but apt aphorism of a great singer, to the effect that "One must neigh in art." This was nearer the truth in his

case: his fame had been won by his lyrical neighing. But for the past five years all his novels and plays had lacked the pathetic and lyric note of passion, and reminded one of the curious words of a physician by the bedside of an incurable patient. Even his caution had gradually failed him. For one of his tales, in which poetry had given way to philosphy, he had adopted as his theme the epigrammatic joke of the Greek philosopher:

"Pyrrhon, are you dead?—I don't know!"

All of which in no way prevented his making desperate love to Lidochka. The leading lady, who had been carried back into the dim twilight of old memories, was suddenly brought into immediate contact with present realities by the sound of Lidochka's weary and irritated voice:

"Good heavens, will they ever stop!"

But they were in no hurry to bring their conversation to a close. They were closer together than before, and occasionally one of them would throw his arms wildly in the air, while the others angrily vociferated as though they were bidding at an auction. The confusion was rendered doubly disagreeable by the hubbub off-stage made by the stage-hands, who were pounding boards and pulling nails from beams, under the direction

of a deep bass voice that seemed to be in command. The voice proclaimed in tones of thunder:

"Bring on the sky now!"

Way up-stage among the heap of rocks a head appeared from time to time, covered with a vizorless cap. A dark, bearded visage was just perceptible, then a bare arm.

"Is it this way, hey?"

The director, vainly attempting to assume a tone of unconcern, was striving to bring his ideas into order by summing up his arguments with his outstretched fingers:

"First of all, the freedom of creation——"

"When I die," sobbed the comedian, "it will be as though I had never lived——"

"That's equally true of millions of others——"

"Millions, you say!"

"I want to live according to the needs of my soul."

"Well, am I preventing that? Now, second, I wish to state——"

"I beg your pardon: I ask——"

"Well, what?"

"Is it in your power to alter the laws of perception, the conception of the cosmos, the universe——?"

Here the leading man became quite wild:

"Damn the universe! The universe is I—I am the universe! I, man!"

"Don't!" snapped the director sarcastically. "That has already been very well put by Hermann Heine."

"*Heinrich* Heine!" corrected the leading man with dogged determination.

"Names don't matter. We're not rehearsing *Who's Who,* are we?"

Noiselessly, like a ghost, a tall thin man in a gray dressing-robe, his face smeared with paint, emerged from the entrance to the right. Over his set face a dishevelled mane of hair stuck out and made him resemble a smoking chimney. In a low and smothered bass voice he inquired:

"What are we to do with the sky?"

The effect of this low, drawling voice, was extraordinary. The disputants suddenly stopped short: the leading lady lifted her hands in terror, the comedian grunted disapproval, and the leading man, thrusting his hands into his pockets, slunk over to the footlights, while the director, with a shake of the head, anxiously inquired:

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Do you want the moon or only the stars for this scene?"

"The moon!" snapped the director, "and don't make it too bright, if you please! It should look as though seen through a mist. It comes on left, and Venus, the morning star, comes on down right, understand? Remember. This is the second time I have told you. And look, over on the left side of the sky are finger marks—I can see five of them, and also that smudge over there—looks like a question-mark——"

"You see, the workmen,—" began the other in a gloomy voice.

"Paint it over."

"Two of the men are drunk. One's asleep and the other——"

"I tell you to paint it over!"

"All right." The man of gloom turned on his heel as if he were set on a spindle, and disappeared into the darkness up-stage.

"An astronomer," began the comedian again with a sigh, then sat himself on a rock and once more carefully spread over his knees his tobacco pouch and cigarette papers. After a moment he was sufficiently composed to suggest a resumption of the rehearsal:

"Suppose we begin again? We were interrupted in the scene between Arkady and Seraphina. Where is Lydia Alexandrovna?

"After Arkady says 'We shall take with you The Path of the Chosen,' I enter and say, 'But what about me?'—Is this supposed to be spoken ironically?"

The director threw up his arms in despair:

"Not at all! That would ruin the tone of the play. No, no. You must understand the inevitability of his faithlessness, you become reconciled to it, conceal your agony. You, too, are one of the Chosen, see?"

"Chosen for torture," retorted the leading man. He was still very much agitated, but that was part of his business as an actor-hero. He strode back and forth just behind the footlights and dug his thumbs into the upper pockets of his waistcoat, looking for all the world like a dancing Jew. He stared into the darkness of the "house," and wrinkled his face by screwing up his eyebrows, which were as thick and bushy as whiskers.

"Confound it, what a stupid play! And you would have me believe it is full of romance and wisdom, with a philosophic underlying truth——"

"Now, when I begin to philosophize," interrupted the comedian, puffing at his cigarette, but was stopped short at the appearance, in the wings, of a large man with a gray beard wearing a thick

overcoat, who came forward with Lidochka. With a slow movement of one hand he took off his soft hat and revealed a thick crop of luxuriant hair. Smiling at the leading lady, and showing his gold teeth, he raised her hand to his lips and respectfully kissed it.

"How do you do," he said loudly, and for some reason emphasized the pronoun. Nodding in the direction of the comedian and the director, he gathered the strands of his beard into one hand, spread it out over his ample chest, and addressed the leading man:

"Why don't you like my play?"

"To tell you the truth," began the other with a shrug, "we have all just been discussing it. It is the general opinion of us artists——"

"That the play is not clever?"

"No, no, not that, of course. . . . That is, I mean, generally speaking, all our modern plays are——"

"Generally speaking," added the comedian, lifting one finger in the air as though to emphasize the importance of his words, and bravely coming to the assistance of his brother artist. The leading man was obviously intimidated, like a schoolboy in the presence of his teacher. He was rather ashamed at his own cowardice. Re-

covering his equilibrium by throwing out his chest, he stood at attention like a soldier:

"The fact is, every play nowadays, everything that's written for the stage—" He stammered, passing his tongue over his dry lips, and the words came forth indistinct. He glanced at his companions and thought, "The dirty devils!"

The author stood facing him, meticulously wiping his glasses with a piece of chamois, listening with marked attention. The director meantime was whispering to the comedian; the leading lady, having rolled the manuscript of her part into a tight package, clutched it with her left hand; Lidochka stood in the center of the stage, fumbling with her handbag, and evidently trying to get something out of it. The leading man, thrusting his hand into his trouser pocket, more than suspected that that little lady had been telling tales. The author, having cleaned his glasses, carefully put them on his nose again and calmly waited. The director thought it high time to intervene and walked quickly up to the author.

"We have been discussing things," he said rather guiltily.

"Yes?"

"Yes. Grouski is of the opinion that all modern plays——"

The leading man, once again conquering his embarrassment, tore off his hat with a resolute gesture, ran his hand through his hair, and began speaking louder than before.

"Quite true. I find—I cannot deny— But first of all, I beg your indulgence if I am too extreme——"

The author graciously lifted his white eyebrows and made a slight bow.

"I have been rather irritable lately," pursued the leading man. "The season has been rather strenuous for me. New plays, heaps of work——"

"Quite so," interjected the comedian.

"And of course I was referring to the *latest* plays."

"Exactly," echoed the comedian.

"And what is there new in them, I ask? Love and death, death and love, everlastingly. There's just one new thing in them all, and that is their threadbare subjects. All the characters do nothing but talk about love and death."

"Because they can neither love nor die," said the leading lady gently, who suddenly felt like a mother ready to protect her child from harm, and wished to forestall the blow.

"No other subjects are treated—ambition,

desire for revenge, or love of adventure. As for the man who desires happiness, why, he doesn't exist. According to the new writers, human beings are never happy, they seem never to want happiness."

The author listened attentively, and the leading man, reassured, waxed more eloquent than before: his thoughts came to him with the irresistible violence of a spring torrent. At the end he paused, waiting for the effect of his speech. The cold clear tones of the author suddenly filled the void left by the loud voice of the actor:

"I seem to remember having read the article from which you quote with such enviable precision."

"Article!" echoed the leading man with a flourish of his hat. "What makes you think I have been quoting from an article?"

"It appeared the night after the production of my play *The False Coin.* I happened to keep it, contrary to my usual custom. Later on I became acquainted with the writer. He is one of those young men who hasten to proclaim their antipathy to everything that has been done in the past."

The author spoke with great coolness, and as if against his will. Though he was ostensibly able

to control his temper, the leading lady could see that he was cleverly simulating, and she remembered that he was always like that in the old days when he had wanted to hurt her.

"I have never read—" said the leading man in some confusion, when the comedian, giving him a nudge, took up the argument in the manner of a professional petitioner:

"You see, we are all looking for a cheerful play. We've had too much gloom and tragedy. Now, you are a man of talent, you can do what you like: why not show us a little of the joy of life, just a little? We could act that sort of play with great success, and the public would like it."

"And demand more and greater joys," said the author politely, smiling into his beard and then wiping the smile off as it were with a sweep of the hand. "I understand your meaning: you think it is possible to change an old rabbit-hunter into a lion-hunter. If one is used to shooting with cartridges—" With a shrug he turned again to the leading man:

"In reading articles of that sort, one should never forget the eternal struggle between parents and children—like the Son of God, who tried in vain to substitute the law of love for the law of strife."

The leading man twisted his hat, trying to conceal his anger. The director passed to and fro near Lidochka, telling her something while she calmly peeled an orange. The comedian was rolling his third cigarette, muttering monotonously to himself:

"Well, something cheerful would make a great hit, anyway——"

"You are quite right—and a good deal of money for the dramatist. Cheerful stories and democratic principles pay well: democracy increases the reading and playgoing public——"

The leading lady was meditating: How strange he looks! What a tired face he has! With mingled feelings of amazement and fear she felt for him a certain hostility which she had believed was long since dead. Though she tried to stifle this, her thoughts reverted to the day when, long ago, she had sat on his knee, dressed in the filmiest négligée, and he had said to her with a yawn:

"Yes, love is of course a wonderful thing, but when you consider that that is all the compensation one gets for life and death——"

The yawn was far more cruel than the sentiment expressed. And now, doing her best to

forget the past and trying to help the leading man, she joined the discussion, speaking rapidly and excitedly:

"We were discussing the limitations of art——"

The author again raised his eyebrows:

"Really? The limitations?"

"Well, not exactly that. Rather, the arbitrary —the conventions—er, how shall I phrase it? Its right, or should I say, the author's right— the dramatist's, the novelist's right, to concentrate our attention upon all the griefs, and sorrows, and sufferings of life. You artists dwell only on people's sins and vices——"

She was doing her best not to allow her hatred to get into her words, but it seemed none the less to concentrate in her throat, to give a peculiar color to her words.

"Conventions, rights? But Lydia Alexandrovna seemed to have another notion of the drift of your discussion. She said——"

"She *has* been tattling," murmured the leading man. "I thought so!"

"We said that modern writers moulded their works out of inferior materials. Everyone is tired of the same old thing. Writers have pro-

claimed so loudly that reality ought to be conquered, that inspiration should be allowed free rein, and what is the results? Yes, Grouski was right when he said that it all ended in the same old exhibition of life and death."

"And you call that arbitrary convention?" asked the author.

"Not in that respect alone," the leading man broke in. He felt that the hasty words of the leading lady were not sufficiently clear, and besides, it was time for him to speak again. But the director sprang up with the intention of settling the matter once for all. Lidochka followed him like a shadow, her eyes glistening with a wicked light.

"You submit, I told them," said the director, "to the violence of the elements, of your instincts, of social conventions, yet you refuse to submit to the violence of reason, which creates arbitrarily the so-called logic of facts, when as a matter of fact, the facts have no logic at all." He tried to clarify his statement with wild flourishes of his hands. "I tried to prove, and so did Pavel Fedorovitch, that our intellects are as yet incapable of grasping the whole truth. I told them that we lived in a world of artificially

created fiction, and that even the science we are so proud of is no more than a chain of intellectual fictions. I did my best to convince them that everything in our world was arbitrary, and the artist, by his inspiration, possessed the inalienable right, I should say the sacred right——"

The book from which he had extracted all this wisdom had just been published: he had read it from cover to cover but said nothing about it to his friends, preferring to palm off these second-hand ideas as his own. He was a comparatively honest man, but being by profession one who must submit to the ideas of others, he was willing and eager to explain to others ideas (wherever he got them) on the sacred aims of the artist.

"I don't understand anything," said the leading lady. "This is all far too subtle for me. But [this to the director] I really don't recall your having said anything of that sort in this place. You have simply invented it in order to show off your knowledge to our author. You might go on with it another time."

The author smiled, and looked round. The director, catching sight of his expression, pushed a chair forward, while the leading lady sank into an arm-chair nearby.

"We were saying how tiresome it was," said she, "to have to go through the same weary task every day——"

"You never said a word about that," argued the director. "You said nothing at all."

The lady he addressed seemed not to have heard him, for she was too deeply offended by the author's unruffled manner. It seemed to say that he, the man who had wronged her, denied everyone the right to judge him. She was now bent on proving that he had wronged the whole world. He seemed no longer tired, only haughty. His eyes were the eyes of a heartless egotist. He sat on that dusty old chair as though he were upon a throne, his feet outstretched in an awkward and almost indecent manner. Lidochka, prettily sucking an orange, gazed at him reverently, a sweetly hypocritical smile plastered to her face. "She's pretending, the minx! What nonsense! He's so old!"

The leading man, now realizing that he could not for some time join the discussion, put on his hat, folded his arms and stood like a monument. He looked occasionally at the author, hatred and malice gleaming from his dark eyes. The comedian reclined on a rock, smoking and bored,

while the director sat by the table, in despair of bringing about a reconciliation.

"No, Pavel Fyodorovitch, don't you think it rather strange? You sit down in your comfortable room, writing your play or novel, compressing into your work all the tragedy of existence, *inventing* sorrow and horror in order to bring about an 'inevitable' crisis. Only the mistakes and meannesses of humanity are used. Doesn't that make life still more miserable than it is? Aren't you thereby perhaps unconsciously poisoning the minds of your readers or spectators? I have no idea what labor or misery the artist feels when he creates, but I do know that the effect on the public is bad. Now, you certainly wouldn't venture to deny——"

The author continued to smile calmly, and a suave wave of the hand plainly said that he did *not* venture to deny. The leading lady felt that she had lost the thread of her argument. She tried once more:

"Think of the younger generation, nourished on this sorrow——"

A carpenter now interrupted from the dark recesses up-stage. He wore a long beard and his cap was set so low on his head that his large ears

stuck out at right-angles from his skull. He looked as though he were walking on ice; his legs moved as though they were not attached to his body. A folding yard-stick hung like a snake from his hand. He stumbled against the comedian.

"I, too, Ivan Stenpanovitch, am a crank—" he said.

"Shh!" hissed the comedian.

"Tha's all right! My wife's had a baby."

"A boy?"

"Of course."

"So that's why you've been drinking!"

"I guess so."

"Quiet!" ordered the director.

"Tha's all right, I'm a crank, too."

"We who act your imaginary miseries, who are doomed to pretend, whose souls are condemned to be exhibited in this dark pit, we have a right to ask you——"

"I'll teach you to grin!" said the carpenter, staggering forward and folding his measure.

"What is the inmost meaning of your art, I ask you?"

"That's right!" chimed in the leading man, speaking so loud that the carpenter sat down quickly on a rock beside the comedian.

"Right, did he say," muttered the carpenter, and then to the leading lady: "I'll teach you to smile, you grinning female!"

"Take him away," said Lidochka to the director, with a contemptuous curl of the lip.

"I've got another baby!" he exclaimed. "I'm not a crank, do you hear?" But by now the director and the comedian had succeeded in escorting him off the stage, where he continued to snort and cry. The author raised his hand to his eyes, glanced at his wrist-watch, and turned to the leading lady:

"I believe you will agree that I have listened patiently to all the things that have been said to me here. Forgive me, Anna Karpovna, if I feel constrained to interrupt the interesting effervescence of your mind, but you really must be very nearly exhausted. And, besides, I have an appointment at the other end of town in a quarter of an hour. Forgive me once again if my answer is neither very long nor very original."

He spoke with the calm assurance of a man who knows he is going to be listened to, and had no doubt that his words would be both unusual and highly original.

"Now he's furious!" thought the leading lady, as she reclined comfortably in her arm-chair.

"Once upon a time," began the author, "I, too, was an actor. I believed that I could make the play I acted in more beautiful and more profound than it was. I wanted to imbue it with my own inspiration. But I failed, and I felt depressed, irritated, I wanted to complain about it to someone else. Now I still feel that I have not strength enough to make life more nearly perfect than it is, but I no longer complain, because I am afraid that the Creator of all life may say to me, 'You fool! My play, too, has been a failure, yet I do not complain.' "

The author sighed a deep sigh. It was quite appropriate to the situation. Why, wondered the leading lady, does he not get angry?

"Let us not even discuss the reason why the play is a failure, and admit simply that the author is deficient in talent or intelligence, or possibly because the actors have not the art necessary to put it over. Being a man, and therefore limited by circumstances to make guesses as to the riddle of life, and being at the same time a mere chronicler of its manifestations, it is my business simply to state. I cannot remain a silent onlooker. I must describe what I see, and tell what I think about the sufferings and sorrows of humanity."

He turned to the comedian, who had been following his words with great attention:

"Doubtless I too am blind to the joys of life."

"He's absolutely wrong," thought the leading lady.

"And I believe this blindness to be common to most of mankind." His eyes half closed, he peered in the direction of the little red light, then once more addressed the actors:

"I simply cannot create cheerful situations, though I find many amusing things in people. As a matter of fact, 'cheerful' things are like counterfeit coins. I cannot sincerely ask my public to accept their few moments of happiness as just recompense for years of misery and sorrow, grief and injustice. It seems that someone is always trying to bribe me with 'cheerfulness' in order that I may blind myself occasionally to the fact that life is a failure and mankind harsh and unjust."

"Can he have become really sincere?" wondered the leading lady.

"Life is repulsive not because it is brought to an abrupt close by the hand of death, but because the existence we lead from day to day is an insult to man. How badly have we organized our existence, we who are so proud of our rea-

son! True, we have improved the material conditions of life, but while doing it we have departed further and further from the real problem of the relation between one human being and another. We have not yet learned even to treat one another with forbearance."

"Oh, indeed!" (A mental note of the leading lady's.)

"In *The Path of the Chosen* I have tried to depict a man who is of course a figment of my imagination, but he is at the same time possible in real life. He finds that everyone, both good and evil, is unhappy, and therefore he is unable to pass judgment on anyone; he becomes a stranger among his fellow-creatures, his 'brothers.' They regard him as a criminal, because he is organically incapable of judging."

"In that case," urged the leading man, "you ought have called your play *The Path of the Outcast.*" He had always regarded the author as a dilettante sculptor who had amused the public with superficially pretty statuettes, but now this exceptionally favored mortal appeared to be capable of suffering the common woes of humanity. There was a certain satisfaction in this reflection. The leading man was happy to perceive that the author was mortal, after all.

"Arkady's state of mind," continued the author, "must not be regarded as misanthropy, though he could not be blamed for hating those who torment others simply because they have learned to do it cleverly."

"Ah," thought the leading lady, "so you too know what it is to suffer? Well, you've richly deserved it." She was, like all her sex, a remote relative of Nemesis: she assumed an expression of great severity.

"However, I have not yet become a misanthrope. I have never aimed at representing the ideal man, an hypothetical abstraction built by the seeker after truth. I kept thinking of the Son of God to whom the concerns both of Cæsar and God were equally foreign. I assure you," he said, smiling sadly, "I desire nothing so much as to create a perfect man, and you see I am trying very hard to do so. My hero is so presumptuous as to believe himself the fountain head of a new and beautiful love of humanity. When Seraphina tells him——"

With a pleasant smile Lidochka came forward and, speaking on her cue, pronounced the words from her rôle: "You will return then, and people will again be seized with a longing for their kind."

"Thank you," said the author, none too politely, "though I don't think you have quoted it quite correctly. He answers: 'I am going away in order that my heart may burn with a new fire: the sparks are already dancing in the darkness of my soul. I will return when the new flame has at last blazed up.' I could not call the play *The Path of the Outcast,* because the hero goes away of his own free will, as any sane man would escape from a madhouse. Now, you find that the play lacks cleverness——"

"But I begged you to pardon me for that——"

"I would agree with you if you had said, not as clever as life itself. That would be more just—but at the same time an insult to us all." He lifted his hat, passed his hand over his hair, ran his fingers through his beard, and pensively continued: "I suppose I shall have to agree with you that art *is* arbitrary——"

"I told you so!" said the director proudly. "Art creates people much more interesting than life. It even disfigures them, so to speak——"

"But the happy are never ironical," soliloquized the leading lady.

Thoughtfully, with deliberation, the author went on to say that art, like science, dealt with

the miraculous: both art and science were quests for the mystical meaning of life.

"Hamlet is just as much an hypothesis as the law of self-preservation. The artist's prophecies are as much the result of second-sight as the scientist's hypotheses. In both cases knowledge is predicated upon some hidden presentiment of truth, and the truth that is set forth is no more than the incarnation of man's creative energy. Intuition and ecstasy. Pure reason in art, as in science, is non-existent."

And he wondered, as he spoke, why he was saying all this. Like all dramatists, forced as they are to depend upon others for the ultimate interpretation of their work, he disliked his interpreters. Whenever he came in contact with them he must needs show them how much more he knew than they did. This is what he felt now, though for the sake of his self-respect he was unwilling to admit the fact, even to himself. As a rule he treated others in a haughty manner, for he was sincerely convinced that the artist is not a bee gathering honey, but a spider spinning an incomparably beautiful web out of his own body and soul. A sudden caprice of the memory prompted the thought that it was this very simile

which caused his first quarrel with the leading lady. She had been afraid of spiders and had insisted that the comparison was ugly, and therefore false. He had been especially irritated by the word "therefore." This memory quickly led to another. It was night. An autumn rain pattered against the window-panes. A lamp with a blue shade burned on the table of his narrow room. The light came through the thin shade and filled the room, which reeked of tobacco smoke. He had just finished reading his new story. It was dull, it had not come out right. Throwing the manuscript under the table in an access of disgust and, painfully conscious of the feebleness of his conception and the impotence of his style, he had risen and walked back and forth in anger with himself. Never had he hated himself as he had on that night. And she, his closest friend, had criticized the story, speaking in a low undertone, choosing her words with the utmost caution. But he had felt that beneath her caution was ill-concealed pity, and that humiliated him. 'Blow out my brains, blow out my brains!' he had repeated to himself. 'You good-for-nothing beggar!' "

The leading lady had lain back on the sofa, looking thoughtfully up at the ceiling. She had

evidently exhausted her vocabulary of consolation. It was indeed small, and had not helped much. The author's despair was absolute. Out of the deathly silence her voice had cut through the dense and smoky air:

"Everything is so poorly made nowadays! Look at these stockings, now, I've worn them only twice and there's a hole already." Yes, she lacked finesse, and there was a certain meanness in her soul. There was something else almost unpleasant. "Doubtless things came to the surface because she was afraid of losing me!" Still, a fine woman, an interesting personality. But when he tried to recall what had been most beautiful in their association, he could remember only her caresses. And now, there she was, sitting on that sofa, her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands, still and gloomy. He paced the room trying to divert her, make his peace, for he had hurt her. At last he found what he thought would interest her, saying, "You know, Niura, counterfeit coins were known to exist five hundred years before the Greeks landed in Italy——"

"What?" she asked, and then burst out laughing. She jumped up, ran to him and threw her arms round his neck: "Good heavens! What

a funny man you are! The Greeks!" After that he had sat on the sofa by her side, toying with her hair, kissing her little ear, and ended by complaining of her, of himself, of all the world. How badly people treated one another!

"Yes," she agreed sorrowfully, "people are, on the whole, evil. Especially that designing little Olga creature. You really oughtn't to pay such attention to her. She has no talent whatsoever——"

He smiled sadly, and went on to address his hearers, though his words sounded hollow and meaningless to him:

"I must speak of the play," he thought, yet he did not wish to do so. They were bored, and except for the director, looked like statues. He nodded as the author spoke, tacitly agreeing with all he said. He enjoyed paradoxes, for his life was shallow and dull.

The leading lady thought the speech quite superfluous, and was even a little ashamed for the author. He had not said enough about the play, giving the impression that he only half understood it himself. Who but herself in this assemblage could correctly understand the flights of his imagination?

The comedian sat, as before, on his rock,

drowsy and bored. Lidochka, still sucking her orange, was the first to show her boredom, though this may have been because the author paid less attention to her than usual. His words sounded like the words of a stranger, and he evidently did not care whether she was listening or not. As for the leading man, he had taken it upon himself to be insulted over what had been said about science: he warmly defended such things as weights and measures, mathematics and chemistry, of which he knew as much as a mouse does of the song of the lark. His loud words aroused the ire of the leading lady. She had for some minutes noticed that a queer change had taken place in her mind: at one moment she was seized with a violent desire to hurt her former lover, and at the next, to soothe and comfort him. She did not even know which desire was uppermost in her heart.

Turning to the leading man, the author explained: "Compare Humboldt's *Cosmos* with Tolstoy's *War and Peace,* or Balzac's *Human Comedy* with the works of Darwin, and you will understand my point about the relation between art and science. What we call reason or commonsense is merely a matter of technique, at most a sort of ethical criticism, if you like. Art and

science are both based on that power which leads a man to try to escape as far as possible from the animal side of his nature, to elaborate and ornament this ghastly world of solitary souls, where we are all rendered the more solitary because we cannot unriddle the secret of the universe."

Again the drunken carpenter emerged up-stage and roared: "Say, you're all having the time of your lives, but I—Take your hands off me!" An unseen arm dragged him off struggling.

"Let me be! I want to show them some tricks."

The comedian pulled himself together and ran off after the carpenter; the leading man murmured something about the difference between tricks and miracles, and the author suddenly interposed:

"I never perform tricks, and I have said nothing about miracles. I know that only by human agency can a miracle be performed, by the power of the intellect, of work, or of the imagination. The desire for miracles is the desire for a quiet faith, while absolute belief in a genuine miracle is simply a form of atheism."

"Why in the world is he saying all this?" wondered the leading lady. She felt for the author the same anxiety she had felt in the early days of

their love, when he had spread out before her like a peacock the full magnificence of his imagination. She had felt as though she were in a sacred temple, where this man was the officiating priest doing service for an unknown god. She had felt a little sorry for him.

"So you judge the artist?" he pursued. "Very well. It is your right. Judgment of one's fellow-creatures requires no talent, and it is a rather comforting pursuit. But you must not be angry if I say your judgment and your sentence upon me leave me utterly indifferent. I love my work, I respect my imagination, and venerate the powers of my intellect. I am satisfied. I look for nothing, expect nothing, more."

"Is that so?" thought the leading lady. Lidochka smiled in astonishment.

"The labor of creation has been ironically referred to here; let us rather say the vexation experienced by any maker of things who cannot succeed. Let us even forget that there are such labors, or pains, or vexations, and think only of Archimedes' joy, the exhilaration of poor mad Nietzsche. Does not the artist in any case deserve respect? Think, he is eternally doomed to live in this dismal world, to pass judgment on his fellow-mortals, to acquit and justify them.

He is the father-confessor of all mankind. Of the tissue of his imagination he creates other worlds——"

He stopped short, feeling as though he had been struck violently on the head. He was sick at heart. He had suddenly realized that he was surrounded by all the mean trivialities of every-day life, all the poisonous incidents and persons that made life ugly and distorted, and interfered with his work. He wanted to scream aloud, "I am not a machine, I am not a digestive machine to assimilate and pass on the banality of you—you insects! I am a man! But why scream? Why complain?" He mastered the impulse, as he called to mind the words of one of his heroes, "You are an honest fellow, Petia, you'll die in silence." He closed his eyes, pressed his fingers tight, and spoke again in a clear metallic voice:

"So you say we utilize cheap, threadbare material. I am glad to see you don't consider grief and suffering of great importance. Yes, I think we are all inclined to stomach each other by covering the ugliness with a thin wash of gravy that ought long ago to have sickened us. However, since I get my material from you, I take the best there is. Am I to blame if the result is not appetizing? Your finest accomplishments

seem to be misery and suffering. I condense, of course, and synthesize. Did you ever meet a woman in real life who was just like Desdemona or Joan of Arc? Men like Timon of Athens, Don Quixote, or Peer Gynt? I give my characters far more reason and feeling than they would have in reality."

"Now you're talking like God Almighty himself," said the leading man.

"Possibly. God is an artist, too. He has created this world out of cheap and threadbare materials. And He, too, is not considered altogether successful as a creator. Why should not He and I speak the same language?"

"You are an atheist!"

"Yes, but my world is the world of the imagination: gods and heroes created by the mind have as good a right in it as chimney sweeps and cads born of women. My God is not the butt of every complaint I may have to make, he is one of the saddest creations of man's feeble imaginings, a dim figure rendered by the force of art alone into a vivid and perceptible being for the children of earth."

The author had finished. He rose and murmured drily:

"I'm afraid I have bored you. It is time for

me to go. I am sorry I cannot attend the rehearsal."

"What a pity!" said Lidochka.

"Yes," repeated the leading man, "it is a pity. Regarding your little speech, it wasn't very clear, you know. It was full of contradictions——"

"Alas!" said the author with a shrug. "I can only console myself with the wise proverb of the Arabs, 'If a camel is not thirsty, it is foolish to force it to drink.'" He spoke with more sadness than vexation.

"At last," thought the leading lady, "he has lost his temper!"

He went up to her, kissed her hand and asked: "I trust I have not offended you?"

"Offended me? Dear no!" she replied resolutely. He then turned to Lidochka, who had run to him.

"He'd make a good lawyer," said the leading man in an undertone.

His lips pursed, the director scrutinized the dial of his watch, while the comedian, rousing himself from his latest sleep, yawned aloud. The leading lady watched the author and Lidochka, who were deeply engaged in conversation.

"You little fool!" she thought, "you'll get burned soon enough!"

"But," continued the leading man, "I got under his skin all the same. He didn't say good-bye to me, and that proves it. And that proverb—stupid! He probably invented it himself on the spur of the moment, and blamed it on the Arabs."

"Well," inquired the comedian, stretching his arms, "are we going to go on with the rehearsal?"

"Let us begin now," said the director in a tone of command. "Come, ladies and gentlemen, the scene between Arkady and Seraphina."

Reading from her manuscript, Lidochka began at once: " 'The more lonely you are among other people' "——

"No, no, not that way," shouted the director. "Why the note of exultation, if you please?"

"Don't you see, I've conquered him?"

"Fool!" thought the leading lady.

"Good Heavens! You have conquered nothing!"

The comedian cleared his throat and winked at the leading man. "This wonderful artist," he said, "got into a fine temper, didn't he? but he didn't stop the play."

"Attention, if you please——"

"One must live, Ivan——"

"Yes. Think of all the things we have to do in order to live."

"Attention! If you please, ladies and gentlemen——"

The comedian persisted in his slow nasal drawl:

"He was very very angry, but he didn't stop this little play——"

THE HERMIT

The stream ran invisible down a shallow ravine, that followed the opening between the trees of the little wood, until it reached the yellow turbulent waters of the Oka. By day it reflected the clear blue of the heavens, and by night the silver of the stars. Along one side of the ravine the shrubs were a tangled mass, forming a dense undergrowth.

In one of the steep slopes a cave had been dug, the entrance to which was barricaded by a gate skillfully constructed of stout boughs. Before the gate was a cobbled square. A crude stairway made of rocks and boulders, led up to it from the river. Three young trees stood guard: a lime, a birch, and an elm. The grounds had obviously been planned with great care and foresight, everything seemed calculated to insure the safety and provide for the convenience of the inmate, and to last a lifetime. The interior of the cave was arranged with the same cunning. Walls and ceilings were entirely covered with a matting of willow branches smeared with clay

and mud from the river. To the left of the entrance was a diminutive stove, and in one corner stood a communion table with an image lamp in a brass mounting. The lamp threw an uncertain guttering flame, scarcely sufficient to light the interior of the cave. Behind the table were three dark ikons. On the walls hung several pairs of new bast shoes. The whole place was filled with the sweet odor of dried leaves. The owner of this dwelling was an old man of medium height, robustly built, but externally a sorry wreck of a man. He looked as if he had been trampled upon, or nibbled at by some ferocious animal. His face was a brick red color, and hideous to look upon. A deep scar on the left cheek extended from the ear to the chin, distorting the mouth and giving it an expression of whimsical and painful irony. His dark eyes, disfigured by trachoma, had no lashes, only red rims instead of eyelids; his hair had come out in patches. But in spite of his infirmities, the old man was as agile as a cat, and when he laughed his ugly eyes beamed with a kindly light, the soft wrinkles almost obliterating the terrible scar. He wore a shirt of good unbleached linen, dark-blue striped trousers, cord bast shoes, and instead of boots or leggings, the skins of animals.

It was on a bright May morning that I first went to see him. We became friends at once, and he asked me to stay with him over-night. During my second visit he told me the story of his life.

"I used to be a sawyer," he began as he lay under an alder on the river bank, warming his naked breast (for he wore no shirt) in the spring sun. "I sawed timber for seventeen years. This scar I got from a saw. Everybody called me Savel the sawyer. Sawing, my friend, is no easy job. You have to swing your arms way up in the air, and your face is hidden in a net: logs overhead and everywhere—nothing else in sight, and sawdust covering you like a cloud. I used to be a cheerful fellow, filled with life. Like the tourman dove—you know, the kind that soar high up in the sky, so high you can't see them; then they fold their wings and tuck their head under one wing and down they swoop. They often kill themselves striking a roof or the earth itself. That's the way I was. Gay, harmless, maybe even a little simple-minded: the women and girls took to me, my word! Ah, it's pleasant to think of the past!"

Rolling about on the grass, he laughed the loud ringing laughter of youth. But deep down in

his throat his voice rattled, and the sound was echoed by the breeze. "Let's have a drink, friend."

I went to the river, where a bottle of vodka had been set to cool. We drank each a small glassful, and ate crackers and fished while the old fellow continued:

"A fine thing, liquor!" he commented, wetting his lips with his tongue. "A fine thing. I can't drink much of it, but in moderation it's a fine thing. Some say the devil was the first to make vodka, but all I say is, Thanks to the devil for doing a good job." He was silent a moment and closed his eyes, then suddenly he raised his voice in a note of protest:

"I've been wronged, cruelly wronged. People have got into the habit of hurting each other! Conscience dwells like a homeless puppy in our midst. Well, after I married things went along very nicely for a while. My wife Natasha was a handsome, kind-hearted woman. We were very comfortable and happy together. Of course she liked a bit of freedom, and I too am a rover: hardly ever at home, chasing after any woman who was attractive and loving. That's only natural, it's inevitable. . . . But I always came home afterward, bringing some money and vari-

ous odds and ends, but I found the neighbors laughing at me, gossiping about me and my wife. Well, I'd give Natasha a little beating just for the sake of decency, make love to her and give her a present, and say to her, 'You little idiot! why do you go about making me the laughing-stock of the town? Am I your enemy, or your friend? Then, of course, she'd cry and swear the neighbors had slandered her. I knew people liked to lie, but I'm an experienced fellow, and you couldn't fool me!"

Something rustled in the bushes behind his back. The old man shook the branches of the elder. "That was where a hedgehog lived. I stepped on him the other day on my way to take a swim in the river: one of the quills went straight into my foot."

The old man smiled, looked into the thicket, and suddenly took up again the thread of his story:

"Yes, I have been cruelly wronged. I had a daughter, Tatiana. I don't wish to boast, but she was a joy to the world, a shining star. I gave her the finest clothes money could buy, and when we went walking together on holidays, she was the fairest of God's creatures. What dignity, what loveliness in her body! What eyes!

Why, Kuzmin the schoolmaster used to call her the most unimaginably wonderful names. When he was drunk he would take me aside and beg me with tears in his eyes to take good care of her. And I did. We were such good friends that people spread nasty reports about us: they were envious of our happiness . . ."

He stopped short, twitching nervously on the grass where he lay. Then he rose, took his shirt from the bush and put it on, carefully buttoning the collar. His face grew painfully distorted, his lips were pressed tightly together; his scanty gray eyebrows drooped far over his staring eyes. The dusk deepened and the wind rose. In the far distance we heard a quail. The old man peered down at the bottom of the ravine.

"Well," he continued, "from that time on, things went badly. Kuzmin, the priest, and the clerk, and some of the peasants—especially the women—gossipped. How people love to ruin a man's character. Tasha wept; she no longer dared show her face in the street; the boys poked fun at her. Everyone seemed pleased. I urged Tasha to go away with me——"

"But what did your wife say?"

"My wife!" He repeated the word with astonishment. "Why, she died. Early one morning.

But that was long before this other matter. Tasha was not thirteen then. My wife! She was a spiteful, hateful, evil woman——"

"But you spoke so highly of her a moment ago?"

This did not trouble him in the least. He scratched his neck, took the end of his beard in his hand and, looking at it, said:

"What if I did? No human being is bad all his life; sometimes even an utterly unworthy creature deserves praise. Men and women are not stones; and even stones change with time. But you mustn't suspect anything bad. She died a natural death. Heart trouble. Any sudden violent emotion would send her into a fit. At times when I made love to her she would have an attack—looked as if she was dead. It was dreadful."

His soft sonorous voice rang out and seemed to mix with the balmy evening air, to become part of the sighing breeze; it mingled with the scent of the grasses, the rustling of the leaves and the rippling of the stream. I felt that if he were to stop speaking, the night would no longer be complete, harmonious. He spoke with ease, never at a loss for the right phrase; he fondled each word and phrase, dressing it up as a child

dresses her doll. He told his tale so simply and persuasively, that I was afraid to interrupt him. I felt that he used his words as if they were magic gems capable of turning a horrible lie into the beautiful semblance of a truth. Though I was always conscious of this I fell a ready victim to his eloquence.

"Why, they even had Tasha examined by a doctor, and then by a bald-headed fool official with gold buttons, a kind of judge perhaps. He asked her all sorts of personal questions. The girl was embarrassed. They arrested me, took me to town and threw me into prison. The bald-headed official came to me and said I had only to confess; my punishment would in that case be very easy. I answered rather as a joke, 'Let me go to Kieff, Your Honor, to see the sacred relics and obtain forgiveness for my sins.' 'Ha!' says he, 'you have confessed.' He thought he'd caught me, the bald-headed skunk! Of course, I hadn't confessed a thing; I said that because I was bored, sick and tired of everything. I'd never been in prison before; I was in the midst of thieves and murderers, always thinking about Tasha and wondering what they would do to her. The tiresome business lasted more than a year, and then the trial began. You should have seen the court

stare at my daughter when she first came in: she was a different girl. What clothes! Why, her blue dress was like a cloud with her bright soul shining through it. I was in a trance in that court-room. There was a queer woman sat by her side, Maria Antzeferova, the squire's wife; a clever minx, but I knew she would worry the life out of me." And he laughed good-naturedly. "She had a son, Matvei Alexeitch. I always thought him a fool, a pale anemic-looking boy with spectacles, hair like a priest's and a funny little beard. Kind-hearted, Lord! He'd give you anything you asked for. The peasants used to take advantage of him—one would ask him for a scythe, another for fire-wood, a third for bread; they took from him what they wanted and what they didn't want. Why, I would say to him, 'Matvei, why do you squander all your property, that your father and his father before him have so painfully accumulated? They worked themselves to death, and skinned their competitors alive to get that property together, risking their immortal souls, and here you are giving it all away. Have you no regard for the sanctity of labor?' And he answered that he was doing what he ought to do. He had no intelligence. Once he was rude to the Governor, and His Ex-

cellency sent him off to China.—Well, as I was saying, at the trial I had a lawyer who defended me for two hours, waving his hands in the air. Tasha also stood up for me . . ."

"But were you really—did you—? Were you guilty?"

He seemed to be striving to recall something, then he said with a smile of indifference: "Why, as a matter of fact, we did seem very affectionate. And you know there were people in the Bible, even saints—. But I'm not saying it was that way with me. I used to tell her long stories. They warm the blood, and Tasha—." He closed his eyes, and with a shake of the head, added: "She was a gorgeously beautiful creature. I am peculiarly susceptible to the charms of women." He stopped short, shook himself, and with a curious mixture of pride and rapture, confided: "I am now sixty-seven, and I can still charm them! Gospel truth! I had to spare them occasionally. . . . A woman is a magnificent creature, my friend. The whole world praises and worships her. What else is there to live for?"

"What did your daughter say at the trial?" I inquired.

"Tasha? Some long rigmarole. Possibly it was Antzeferova who suggested it to her. She

was under obligations to me. The marks of 'violence' on the girl were accidental, and I was released. The trial was simply a farce, to protect the dignity of the law. The law's absurd: so long as we live according to our own laws, that's all that should be expected of us. See the way I live here, disturbing no one. Isn't that better?"

"But what about murderers?" I ventured.

"Kill them. He who kills must be destroyed at once.—Yes, I am contented here. I am not afraid of thieves, for I have nothing worth stealing. There is no greed, no envy about me. Riches breed thieves."

It was rapidly growing dark, the ravine was a black hole. An owl hooted in the woods. The old man listened: "That owl," he said, "lives in a hollow tree not far away. Sometimes she flies about too late and the dawn catches her away from home. I see her. 'You silly fool,' I say, and stick my tongue out at her. She sits silently and makes no answer. If the day birds catch sight of her, it's a tragedy."

I asked him how he came to lead his hermit's life, and he answered:

"I left home, of course, and began wandering. Antzeferova, the sly fox, played a trick on me after the trial; she wouldn't let me see Tasha.

Said *she* knew the truth, and that I owed it to her I wasn't sent to the gallows, and that she was going to keep Tasha. I tried to get round her but saw that was useless, so I went to Kieff, and then to Siberia. I picked up a good deal of cash and went back to my old haunts. I learned that Antzeferova had been killed in an accident, run over by a railway carriage. Tasha had married a surgeon's assistant and gone to live in Kursk. I followed after her, but learned she had gone to live in Ujun, in Persia. I went to Tzaritzin and took the boat there for Ujun. Tasha had died. Her husband was a drunkard, a red-haired, red-nosed fellow, pleasant enough. He asked me if I happened to be Tasha's father. I denied it, and said I had seen him some time ago in Siberia. I didn't want to tell him who I was. . . . Then I went to Mount Athos, and came near settling there. It's a pleasant spot at first, but I came to dislike it: what with the roar of the sea, and the strange people, the hills and mountains, the pitch-black nights—well, you feel as if you were drowning in it all. And what hot days! So I made my way back. I've lived here nine years. See, I've planted trees: first that birch, three years later the lime, and then that elm over there. The

people like me hereabouts, I console them. Come again on a Sunday and watch them."

I was curious to know why this hermit seldom used the name of God, so common on the lips of people in his situation. I wondered if he prayed much?

"Not very much. At first I did, earnestly. I used to kneel for hours on end. My hands and back were used to such strain. Why, I can bow my head to the ground a thousand times without a tremor, but my knees can't stand it. They ache. After a while I asked myself why I was praying? I had all I needed, people respected me, I was only disturbing God. God has His work to do, so why bother Him? Much better to help other people and spare God their worries. God cares for us, why should we not do something for Him? God lives for the big, important people, what time can He spare for me? I'm a poor simple-minded fellow. So at night when I can't sleep I go out of my cave, sit down somewhere in the open and looking up into God's heavens, ask myself, How does He feel up there? A pleasant pastime, I assure you. So pleasant I can't describe it to you. It's marvelous to dream such dreams when you're awake. Besides,

it's not as tiring as prayer. I don't ask God for anything nor do I advise others to do it; I just say, Have pity on God, and come and see me: how useful I am to Him and to my fellow-men!"

There was no trace of pride in this, only the calm assurance of a skilled artisan speaking of something he knows about. His eyes laughed merrily, and made me almost forget the hideousness of his face.

"You ask how I live in the winter? Why, my cave is very warm. The only difficulty is that the people find it hard to come here when the snow's too deep and I have to go without bread for two or three days. There was one time I had nothing at all for eight days; at the end of that time I fell down in a faint. A young girl happened in and brought me to. She had been a servant in a convent, and had married a schoolmaster afterward: I suggested the idea to her. 'Lenka,' I said, 'why are you living all by yourself?' She said it was because she was an orphan. 'Marry then,' I said, 'and you won't be an orphan any longer. To the schoolmaster, whose name was Pevtzov, I said, 'Misha, take a look at that girl.' Well, soon after that they were engaged. They are happy together. . . . In winter I go off to various towns —Sarov, Optime, Oransky, Diveisky—where

there are monasteries. But the monks don't care for me: they are always wanting me to join their orders. That would be a good thing for them, because I have quite a following among the people, but I don't want to become a monk, it wouldn't suit me. I'm not a saint, I'm just a quiet, ordinary fellow. With the nuns, on the other hand," he went on, laughing and rubbing his sides with his hands, "I am a welcome guest. They like me. I'm not boasting—they do. I know women thoroughly: noblewomen, tradespeople, peasants, I can read their souls as I can my own. I have only to look into their eyes. I understand their restlessness. I could tell you tales——"

Again he broke off his narrative to urge me to come when the people were there. "And now, what do you say to another glass?" We drank, and once again the old man smacked his lips. "What a fine wholesome thing is wine!" he exclaimed.

The short night had already melted away, and in the cool of the dawn I offered to help him build a fire.

"What for?" he inquired. "Are you cold? An old man like me doesn't feel cold, but you—! Well, you'd better go into the cave and lie down

for a bit. If you light a fire it will attract all kinds of insects; they'd fly into the fire and get burned up. I don't like to see that. The sun, now, the father of all fire, kills nothing. We should not sacrifice these little insects merely for the sake of our personal comfort."

I agreed with him and retired into the cave, where I could hear him moving about for some time. He had gone into the river for a swim. Through the splashing I could hear him murmur to the fishes: "Psht! What are you afraid of, you little fool!" Then he began to sing softly in a high-pitched trembling voice.

When I awoke and came out of the cave I found Savel in a kneeling position, deftly plaiting a bast shoe, talking at the same time to a chaffinch that sang madly, furiously, in a nearby bush. "Fire away!" he said, "go on, sing: the day is yours! . . . Ha, (this to me) did you have a pleasant nap? Get washed now—tea is ready—I'll wait for you."

"Didn't *you* sleep at all?"

"I'll have plenty of time to sleep when I'm dead, my friend."

On Saturday, three days later, I went again to see him. He greeted me like an old friend. I

had thought he might have forgotten all about me.

"Ah, you've brought wine! And wheat bread! You are really very kind. People must love you, they naturally like those who are good to them. It's human nature. And sausage? No, I don't like sausage, it's food for dogs. You may eat it if you like. This fish, though, I'm very fond of. It's a ribet, a sweet fish that's caught in the Caspian. Why, you must have spent over a rouble and a half on all this food. You are a queer one. Well, never mind. Thank you once again."

He seemed more cordial, more radiantly alive than before, and I thought to myself, "Am I really beholding a completely happy man?" I, too, felt uplifted. With what soft cat-like movements he bustled off, putting my gifts away, talking all the while in that caressing eloquent way that beguiles and intoxicates. The movements of his well-built body were agile as an adder's. He appeared almost handsome, despite his scar and those staring eyes that looked as if they had been torn asunder. He radiated the beauty of a complete and variegated human existence, which was emphasized and heightened by his physical deformities. Once again we spent the night talking, and I observed with interest how his plumed

whiskers bristled and his little gray beard trembled with excitement as he burst into long peals of laughter, showing his long white cat's teeth.

Down below in the ravine there was not a sound, while overhead the wind sighed and moaned through the pines and rustled the dry oak leaves. The sky above showed deep blue between the stormy clouds that almost covered it.

"Hark!" The old man lifted a hand in warning. I heard nothing but the wind and leaves. "A fox! She's stealing up on us. Her hole is not far off. Hunters always ask me whether there's a fox hereabouts, but I lie to them, saying there are none. I dislike hunters, confound them!"

I had noticed before that the old man seemed to want to swear in the good old-fashioned Russian manner, but realizing that to do so was not fitting, he would use only such expressions as "Confound you!" "Devil take you!", or "You son of a hen!"

He took another sip of vodka and closing his eyes, continued: "This fish is delicious. Thank you again. I like good things to eat."

I was anxious to know what he thought about God, and I cautiously directed the conversation to the subject. He was reticent at first, and an-

swered in the usual way with wanderers and pilgrims. But I felt he did not mean what he said, that it bored him. Suddenly coming close to me, he lowered his voice and began:

"Let me tell you about a puny little French priest I once knew. He was a very dark-skinned fellow, and wore gold spectacles on his little nose; his hands were the hands of a child. He looked like one of God's playthings. I met him first at the Potchaevskaia Lavro. That's way off, over there." He waved his hand vaguely toward the East. Then, stretching out his legs and propping his back against the rocks, he went on: "I was chatting idly with a monk, who was telling me that in his opinion people should be punished more often than they were. I laughed at him and answered that if everyone were to be punished according to his deserts, we should have no time left for anything else: we'd be torturing each other all the time. The monk flew into a rage, called me a fool, and left. But the little priest, who had been sitting in a corner all the time, now came up to me. What a man he was! Why, he seemed like John the Baptist. He found it hard to speak in a foreign language, but what he said was uttered with deep feeling. 'You haven't much faith in what that monk says,'

he began, 'and you are quite right. God is not an enemy, but a compassionate friend. His infinite mercy has melted into our lives like sugar in water. But the water is dirty, so dirty that we forget God is a part of it. Nevertheless, His spirit is always with us, it flows everywhere among men, dwelling in every soul like a spark. We should seek God in man, and then gather together the diverse elements of Him into one great being. Satan will come to Him and say "You are great, Lord, and infinitely powerful. I knew this not: forgive me. I will struggle no longer with you, but ask only to serve you!' . . ."

The old man spoke with great intensity, the dilated pupils of his eyes gleaming with a strange light.

" 'Then an end will come to all evil, all dissension among men will cease, and they will return to God like rivers flowing into the great ocean.' "

These last words he uttered in a choked voice while he slapped his knee and laughed loud and long. Between ripples of laughter he managed to continue in the highest good-humor:

"Such talk touched me deeply, went straight to my heart. My soul seemed flooded with light. I tried to tell the little priest what I felt, but I couldn't, so I just muttered, 'You mortal in the

form of our Lord, let me press you to my heart!' We embraced and wept like children who have found their long-lost parents. And we were both elderly men—his hair was very gray round the tonsure. I had to tell him how much he resembled John the Baptist and Christ Himself, though I couldn't resist saying that he also resembled a starling. He kept on abusing that other monk, Vitali, whom he dubbed a nail. Just like a nail, so sharp, you know. . . . It's hard to make clear to you what joy I felt, my friend: you, of course, can read and write and learn things for yourself, but at that time I was ignorant, blind: my eyes were open, but I saw nothing. I didn't know where God was. . . ."

Her voice broken, speaking hoarsely and constantly coughing, the young woman began in a rather offended tone. Her friend occasionally put in a word or two in a deep, soft voice. Savel, full of compassion, replied strangely:

"So that's the way it is!"

The woman cried pitifully, and the old man made answer:

"Wait, dear, don't cry. Listen to me." His voice had lost its harsh tone, becoming clearer: his words formed melodies like the unpremedi-

tated notes of the goldfinch. Through the network of branches I could see him bending toward the woman, and looking her straight in the eyes. She was seated in an uncomfortable position, her eyes wide open and her hands pressed tight to her breast. The friend rocked backward and forward. "If they have wronged you," he was saying, "they have wronged God." He spoke with happy confidence, joyously, as if he scarcely meant what he said. "Where is God? He dwells within your own soul, His Holy Spirit abides in your breast. Those fools, your brothers, have pierced His very heart by their folly. Pity them for having wronged you. Hurting God should be as though they were hurting a child of yours." He repeated again the word "Dear," and then called her "Dearest." I have never heard those words so charged with exultant tenderness. The old man was now speaking quickly, in an undertone, his hand on the woman's shoulder, swaying her gently to and fro. She became drowsy. She sat on the stones at the old man's feet, arranging her blue skirt in neat folds about her large body.

"Pigs, dogs, horses, all the beasts have faith in man's wisdom, so do not forget that your brothers,

too, are men. Tell the eldest to come and see me next Sunday."

"He won't come," she said.

"He will come," said the old man.

Someone was climbing down the slopes of the ravine, loosening clods of earth and shaking the branches of the trees. "He will come," repeated the hermit. "And now, go in peace, with God's blessing." From behind the bushes appeared a broad-shouldered peasant with a long black beard. He wore a pink shirt which was new, stiff and uncomfortable. He had no cap, and his dishevelled mane stuck up in all directions. His small bear-like eyes were contracted in an ugly scowl. Making way for the women to pass, he looked after them, coughed loudly and scratched his chest.

"How goes it with Olesha?" inquired the old man with a smile.

"I've just come to see you," said Olesha. "I want to chat with you."

"Very well, talk away." They said nothing for a few moments, but stood eyeing each other earnestly. Suddenly both began speaking at the same time:

"Working hard?"

"I'm bored, father."

"You're a fine big peasant, Olesha!"

"If I was only as kind as you, father——"

"You are a man of great strength."

"But what can I do with it? Now, if I had your soul——"

"When your house burnt down you went to work and built everything new. Anyone else would have been discouraged."

"I have a wicked heart, father," retorted the peasant, and cursed him with an amazing variety of oaths. But the old man went on calmly:

"You have just an ordinary human heart. You're restless, of course, you seek peace——"

"You are right, father."

They went on talking for half an hour, the peasant relating the story of a wicked man whose life was full of misfortunes and had become a burden, while the hermit told of another man, strong, courageous, obstinate, a man whose soul was good. Finally the peasant told the hermit that he had "made it up with Peter."

"Yes, so I have heard. We drank a glass of wine together and I said to him, 'What about Olesha, you devil?' and he said, 'Yes, he's a good fellow, curse him!' 'But you're both children of God,' I replied.

"Yes, he's a fine man, and clever, too. Now, father, tell me, do you think I should marry?"

"Of course."

"Marry Anfisa?"

"Yes. She'll make you a good wife. She is beautiful and healthy. She's a widow: she's had a husband already and a pretty hard life. I'm sure she will make you happy."

"Well, I think I'll do it."

"You surely ought to." The hermit went on telling a long and involved story of a dog, and the sullen face of the other was transfigured.

"And now off with you, Olesha. Someone else is coming!"

"Someone else in trouble? All right." And Olesha went down to the stream, drinking from the palm of his hand, then lay down flat on his back and went to sleep.

The newcomer was a lame girl wearing a striped skirt. A thick braid of fair hair hung down to her waist. She had big and very dark blue eyes. Her face was unusually attractive. The old man greeted her joyfully and with tender solicitude offered her a seat. At the same moment another woman appeared on the scene: a tall dark woman who looked like a nun, accompanied by a large-headed youth with flaxen hair,

whose expressionless smile looked as if it were plastered on his face. The hermit quickly told the girl to hurry into the cave, then slammed the door to. He returned, sat on a stone between the woman and the boy, and listened in silence to the old woman's mumbling words.

"That's enough," he said at last in a loud and stern voice. "You say he won't listen to you?"

"No, he won't. Whatever I say——"

"So he won't listen to her, boy?" But the youth made no reply. "Then *you* needn't listen," he went on, as the youth only smiled. "As for you, woman, you've begun something very bad. It's a case for the courts, let me tell you. Nothing can be worse than that. So go away. There's nothing more to be said. She wants to deceive you, boy."

The boy, still smiling, said in his high falsetto voice: "I know that all right."

"Well," answered the hermit, "that's all, then. You have no luck, woman. No, and you won't have any!"

They both hung their heads, bowed to the old man in silence, and ascended the path into the thicket. I could see them stop a hundred paces higher up, face each other and talk at the same time, then sit down at the foot of a pine and

gesticulate angrily. I could even hear the murmur of their voices above the rustling of a stream far below.

"Dearest!" God only knows how this hideous old man managed to endow that word with such fascinating tenderness. "It is too soon to think about that," he continued as he led the lame girl from the cave. He held her hand as one holds the hand of a child who is just learning to walk. She swayed from side to side, and wiped the tears from her eyes with her small white hands.

The hermit took his place beside her on a stone and spoke clearly and melodiously, as though telling a fairy tale: "You are a flower. God has created you to be happy, endowing you with the power to give joy to others. The clear light in your eyes is a feast for the soul, dearest." And again that word "dearest" seemed magically endowed with all the mysterious meanings of life, it was a touchstone for the solution of all the entanglements of human relationships. It seemed capable of touching the soul not only of a simple peasant, but of everyone who heard it. The hermit spoke it caressingly, making it at once sad and triumphant. It came from a source of inexhaustible love and compassion. Though I was experienced in every variety of human turpi-

tude, I felt that day all my cynicism vanish like mists before the clear rays of the sun. The lame girl sobbed with joy as she rose to go, and kept nodding her head in the direction of the hermit as she walked off.

"Thank you, dear," he said as they parted, "that's all right, and don't you worry. You have happiness before you: that is your function in life: to give joy."

Olesha, now wide awake, was standing by the stream shaking his dishevelled mane, looking at the girl with a broad grin. Suddenly he put two fingers into his mouth and gave a shrill whistle. The girl lurched forward and dived like a fish straight into the thicket.

"You're crazy, Olesha," said the old man reproachfully.

Olesha knelt down comically and pulled a bottle of vodka from the water, brandishing it in the air.

"Come on, father," he said, "let's have a drink."

"Not now," answered the hermit, "later in the evening."

"Then I'll wait for you." This statement he accompanied by a volley of curses. "You're a wizard, all right, and a saint, too, by God! You

play with human souls the way a child plays with toys. I was just thinking what a fellow you are, lying here in the grass."

"Quiet, Olesha!"

The old woman now came back with the boy and whispered to the old man. Her manner showed that she was embarrassed and ashamed. The hermit shook his head incredulously and took his two guests into the cave. Meantime Olesha caught sight of me in the bushes and climbed up through the underbrush.

"You're a town bird, eh?" he asked. He was in a gay and garrulous mood that day, and talked at considerable length with a good deal of profanity thrown in, about the hermit, whom he praised to the skies.

"He's a great consolation for us all. I actually live on his soul. My own is covered with wickedness, as thick as hair. I'm a reckless fellow." He went on to describe his sinful life, elaborating every detail in the most lurid fashion. I refused to believe him.

The old woman now came out of the cave, and made a low bow to Savel. "Don't be angry with me, father," she said.

"All right, my friend."

"You know yourself——"

"Yes, I know. Every human being fears poverty, and beggars are never welcome. But never forget God, who dwells in you and in all things. If we remembered God there would be no poverty. That's the truth, my friend. Go, and God bless you!" The boy stood sniffling, timidly glancing at the hermit and hiding behind his stepmother's back.

Still another pilgrim now put in an appearance: a handsome woman from the town, wearing a mauve dress, and a blue shawl over her head. Her gray blue eyes flashed with anger and suspicion, until the old man uttered the magic word "Dearest."

Olesha continued to chatter—I could hear nothing else: "He can melt the soul," he said, "the way you melt tin. He's been a great help to me. If it hadn't been for him, what wouldn't I have done! . . . It would have meant Siberia, I can tell you that!" He was silent a while, and from below I could hear the hermit speaking:

"Everyone can bring happiness to you, my dear, and yet you say such wicked things. Chase wickedness away, dearest! Now, what do our feast-days symbolize? They are symbols of goodness, not of evil. What do you doubt?

Yourself, your power as a woman? Your beauty and that which lies concealed in it? Why, the spirit of God is in it, dearest."

I myself was on the verge of tears. How great is the magic power of a word animated by love.

Before night had fallen some thirty persons had come to see the hermit: stolid peasants with their staves, all those who had been oppressed with grief and tortured by the problems of life. Over half these visitors were women. Before the last one left I had become impatient and listened no more, but waited until I might see Savel alone. Towards evening he allowed Olesha and me to build a fire on the cobbled square before the entrance to his cave. We prepared tea and a little supper, while he chased off with a swing of his coat the insects that were attracted in the direction of the flames.

"Well," he said, "another day devoted to the soul." He seemed very thoughtful and very tired. Olesha argued with him and tried to make him accept money for his services.

"No, no," he answered, "it would be wrong."

"But you might take from one and give to another. To me, for instance. I could buy a horse."

"Tell the children to come tomorrow, Olesha, I'll have sweets for them. The women brought a lot today."

While Olesha was down by the stream washing his hands, I said to the hermit: "It's wonderful how you talk to people, Father Savel."

"Yes, yes, quite true," he replied. "Didn't I say I could do it well? People have the greatest esteem for me, too. I tell them the truth, the one each of them needs. That's the reason—" He smiled gaily and went on as though he were not so weary: "Best of all, I can talk to women. Did you hear me? I am always that way, friend: the moment I lay eyes on a beautiful girl or a woman, my soul leaps up for joy; it blossoms like a flower. I am grateful to them. They remind me of all the other women I have ever known, and they are without number."

Olesha had now returned from the stream. "Will you stand good for sixty roubles, Father, I want from the Shah? It's for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, eh? Very well."

"Did you hear that?" asked Olesha, turning to me in triumph: "The Shah, my boy, is a terrible fellow. If he so much as glances at you a long way off, you feel your shirt slipping off your shoulders into his grasp. But when Father

Savel goes to see him, he's like a whipped puppy. He made the Shah give a lot of lumber to the people whose houses burned down."

Olesha then proceeded to bustle about here and there, disturbing the old man's rest. Savel sat staring into the flames, downcast and tired. As he waved his coat over the fire he reminded me of a bird with a broken wing. It was impossible to subdue the peasant, who had already emptied two glasses of vodka and was becoming boisterously merry. The hermit drank a small glassful, ate a boiled egg and bread, and finally advised Olesha to go home. The big dark lout got up, made the sign of the cross and, looking up into the overcast heavens, "Good health to you, father," he said, "and thank you." Thrusting his huge paw into my hand he silently bade me good-bye and, pushing into the thicket, made his way up the pathway beyond.

"Is he a good man?" I inquired.

"A very good man, only he requires constant watching. He's a wild one. He beat his wife so hard she was never able to bear children. Later on, she had to be sent to an asylum. I used to ask him why he beat her and he said just because he wanted to." The hermit lapsed into silence, his arms dropped to his side. His face, lighted

by the red flames, assumed an expression of mystery. The dark pupils of his queer eyes seemed to change their shape, and he looked like a blind man. His lips moved, opening and contracting as though he were trying to say something, but could not. After a time, he resumed the conversation, this time in a new and odd manner.

"This happens to many men, my friend. They are suddenly seized by an overwhelming impulse to beat a woman, even when she is not at fault. Only a moment before, he may have been kissing her, and yet this strange impulse will surge up within his breast. Yes, yes, that often happens. Let me tell you: I am a quiet man myself, and I have a tender heart. When I was young I adored women; I wanted to mix my essential being with theirs, body and soul. And yet, at the same instant I felt this, I would be tempted to beat, strike, pinch hard, and I often gave in to the temptation. She would shriek and ask what was the matter. I could say nothing, I had no answer to make."

I regarded the old man with amazement, and I too could say nothing. What he told me was puzzling. After a moment's pause he began again to speak of Olesha: "After his wife went mad," he said, "Olesha behaved much worse than

before. He appeared possessed by the spirit of recklessness; he had violent attacks of what seemed like madness. He thought he was damned and tried to beat everyone he saw. It is not so very long since the other peasants brought him to me, bound with cords. They had had to beat him mercilessly: his body was a swollen mass of bruises. 'Make him behave, Father,' they told me, 'or we'll have to kill him. He gives us no peace, the beast.' I nursed him for five days—you have observed that I know how to care for people. . . . Yes, friend, life is a difficult thing for human beings. It is not sweet. I try to comfort them."

Compassion beamed in his soft eyes, though the rest of his face was more hideous than usual. "There are those," he continued, "whom I am forced to deceive a little, men and women for whom there really is no consolation on earth."

There were many things I wanted to ask, but he had eaten practically nothing all that day; exhaustion and the drink seemed to have overpowered him. He swayed a little and the deep scars over his eyes were intensified. Yet I ventured to continue: "Father Savel, do you believe there is a hell?"

The old man roused himself and in a loud ring-

ing voice, tinged with resentment, he answered: "How could it exist? There is God, and you speak of hell! The two are incompatible. Hell is only the invention of you learned men; you want to frighten the others. You, and the priests. How useless. Besides, nobody really believes in that fraud and therefore nobody fears it."

"In that case where does the devil live?"

"You should not joke about it."

"I am not joking, I assure you."

"You had better not," was his answer, as he shook his coat over the fire. "Don't laugh at the devil. Everyone has his burden in this world, and that French priest doubtless spoke truth when he said that a time will come when the devil will bow down before God. Another priest once told me the story of the prodigal son, out of the Bible. I remember that story so clearly. In my opinion that is a parable about the devil: it was he who made the prodigal sin."

The hermit was now very tired, and I urged him to lie down and sleep.

"Yes, yes," he acquiesced, "it's high time." And he turned over, drew his knees way up, pulled his coat over his head and said no more. The branches hissed and cracked and the smoke from

the fire curled upwards in fantastic arabesques, disappearing into the blackness of the night sky.

Suddenly, out of the nocturnal stillness, the hermit sat up again and told me the secret of his life. I am making this into a short story, but what he told me occupied the whole night.

"Is it raining?" he asked, sniffing the air like an animal. "No, it's just the damp evening air. Well, as I was saying: these Frenchmen and other foreigners are all high-minded folk, I see. In the Khartoff District, or was it Poltava? a certain great Prince had an English steward. This steward had his eye on me for some time and then called me into the room. 'Here, old man,' he said, 'is a secret letter. Take it to such and such a place, and give it to so and so. Are you willing?' I thought, why shouldn't I? I didn't care where I went, and the place he mentioned was not over a hundred versts away. I took the packet, tied a string round it, fastened it inside my shirt, and walked out. When I arrived I asked to see the Squire who was to receive the letter. But they wouldn't admit me; they beat me and drove me off. Confound you all, I thought, and blow you all sky-high! During my journey that letter got all crumpled up—the sweat from my body had soaked through the paper. I looked

at it and through a hole I saw money—about three thousand roubles! Then I was frightened. Suppose someone had seen it! Suppose I were robbed at night! What was I to do? I sat down in a field under a tree, and there I saw a gentleman driving along the road in my direction. Maybe this was the man I was directed to see? I stepped into the road and barred his way, waving my stick at him. The coachman went at me with his whip, but the gentleman wouldn't let him strike me. He *was* the very Squire I was looking for. I gave him the packet and he invited me to take a place beside him in his carriage. We arrived at his house and he took me into a magnificent room, where he asked me what the letter contained. I told him it was money. I knew because I had seen it through the damaged wrapping. He asked me who had given me the letter, but I couldn't say, I had been told not to mention the name. He shouted at me and threatened to call in the police and have me sent to prison. I said I didn't mind that; what had to be, had to be. He tried to frighten me, but couldn't. Suddenly a door flew open and someone entered: it was the English steward! What did it all mean? He was laughing loudly. It seems he had come by train and had been wait-

ing. He had wondered whether I would come at all. Both of them knew I had been there before, and had seen the servants driving me off. They had even ordered them to do that. It was all to test me, to see if I could be trusted. They were greatly pleased with the result of their plan. Then they ordered me to wash, gave me a change of clothes and asked me to come and eat with them. What a feast we had! And what wines! Once you had a sip you couldn't close your mouth again. It stung, burnt you through and through. And the bouquet! They made me drink so much that I was sick afterwards. Next day I ate with them again. During dinner I told them many things that seemed to surprise them. The Englishman got drunk and maintained that the Russians were the most wonderful people on the face of the earth, that no one could tell what they would do next. In his frenzy he thumped the table with his great fists. They forced me to accept money from them. I took it, though it meant little to me. But I do like to buy things, and one day I bought a doll. I had seen it in a shop window, looking exactly like a child; it could even open and close its eyes. I carried it about with me for four days. I would often sit down, pull it out of my wallet and just look at it. Then

I gave it away to a little girl of the village. Her father wanted to know if I had stolen it, and I said I had, because I was ashamed to confess I had bought it for myself. . . ."

"What was the end of the incident about the Englishman?" I inquired.

"They let me go, and that was all. I shook hands with them and they asked me to forgive them; they had only meant it as a joke. . . . Now I must go to sleep. Tomorrow will be a trying day." Settling down again he continued to murmur: "What a curious creature I used to be. I would have fits of sudden joyousness, and then I would dance. Other people laughed at me, but I would go on dancing all the same. What of it? I had no children about me to make me ashamed. It was just my soul exulting. The soul is a bird, and no one knows where it flies."

The old man had now sunk into a sort of quiet delirium. He spoke for a while, then lapsed into silence, from which he would rouse himself as though he had had a dash of cold rain in the face.

"Late last autumn," he said, "a lady came to see me. She was from the neighboring town there. She was rather puny, and not very pleasant, but when I had a good look at her eyes, good Lord! I was fascinated! If I could have had

her, body and soul, you might have cut me to pieces afterwards, tortured and killed me. I told her to go away or I might hurt her. I said I couldn't talk to her. I don't know if she understood me or not, but she hurried away. I had long sleepless nights after that because of her. Her eyes haunted me. . . . I am an old man, yes, and a hermit, but the soul knows no law, it counts not the years . . ."

He stretched himself at full length on the ground, closing his scarred red eyelids and smacking his lips. "Now," he murmured, "I *will* sleep." And he muffled his head in his overcoat and was quiet.

He woke at daybreak, looked at the overclouded sky and running quickly to the stream, undressed and washed his sturdy body from head to foot.

"Hand me my shirt, friend," he shouted, "and my trousers. They are in the cave." I did as he asked. When he was dressed and had combed his hair, he was almost good-looking. He reminded me a little of some saint.

"Always wash thoroughly," he said, "before you receive visitors."

He refused to take vodka. "No, and I don't want anything to eat, either. Only a little tea.

Nothing that clouds the mind. The soul must be free and light for this work."

Visitors began to appear after midday, but until then the hermit preserved a gloomy silence. Though his kindly eyes sparkled with vitality, his face was concentrated into a grave dignity. He glanced occasionally at the sky, listened to the murmur of the wind in the trees; his expression bespoke acute pain.

"Someone is coming."

I could hear nothing.

"Women, this time. Don't say anything, and don't get in the way, or you'll frighten them off. Hide over there and don't stir. Sh!"

Two women crept noiselessly out of the bushes, one of them middle-aged and stout, with meek brown eyes like a horse's; the other young, with the gray face of a consumptive. Both stared at me in terror as I began climbing the slope. I heard the old man reassuring them: "Pay no attention to him, he won't disturb you. He is a poor, half-witted fellow. He won't bother us."

I stood and gazed at the old man, thinking to myself: "Is he really a saint, with infinite compassion and love for humanity?" Then I remembered the lame girl with the soft sad eyes, and it seemed to me that she symbolized all of life.

I remembered how she had stood in the presence of that hideous little god, while he, whose wisdom lay in love alone, concentrated all the overmastering power of that love into one word of consolation—"Dearest!"

A SKY-BLUE LIFE

Konstantin Mironoff sat at his window staring into the street, trying not to think. The wind had finally swept the sky clean of clouds, and arranging in pretty festoons and ripples the dust along the unpaved thoroughfare, died down as though burying itself in the road. Sparrows came flying like bouncing balls, and gathered round a chicken's head and plucked at the feathers; a cat crawled from under the Rosanoffs' gate, watched the birds intently, took aim at one, but sprang a moment too late. She patted the tender morsel with her soft paw, then snatching it, shook it violently and deliberately, and sedately raising her tail, carried her booty off under the gate.

Ivan Ivanovitch Rosanoff came plodding along, chasing a fawn-colored goat before him with a stick. The church bells had just begun to ring. The man lifted his hat and revealed a bald skull resembling that of a holy martyr. He glanced up with approval into the cool azure sky, while the goat, stopping in its turn, shook its beard and planted its hoofs deep in the dirt.

"All this," mused Mironoff, "would be quite impossible in Paris. One is not allowed to lead goats through the streets of Paris. And people don't throw dead chickens' heads out of their windows."

In the distance below, beyond the lead-colored strip of river, behind the dingy distillery buildings and the gray houses occupied by the local colony of lunatics, a swollen, orange-hued, rayless sun was sinking over the sandy hills, among the shaggy black junipers. Mironoff had witnessed the same phenomenon day in and day out for so long that it had become tiresome as the page of an often-read book. In order to divert his thoughts he imagined the pearl-tinted sky to be a huge map: there was Moscow, there Berlin, there Cologne, and—there ought to be Paris. This evening the sky was too crowded to show Paris, which was very irritating. It was important that Paris should be seen in the imaginary map, it should have a tangible position. It rose before him, a city of azure blue, filled with a solemn organ music, a city with happy inhabitants and wondrous adventures, where life was easy and simple, where even so wicked a fellow as Rocambole found it impossible to be wicked all the time. In Paris the monster Quasimodo himself was

pleasantly fascinating. There lived the Three Musketeers, the mysterious Knight of the Hen-House, the fearless D'Artagnan——

On the river bank two voices greeted the sinking sun with a song chanted in a languid drawl to the accompaniment of the brassy clang of church bells. All day long, since early morning, the dry wind had driven the dust in circling eddies, so that the song and the bells seemed to have combined to bring peace and relief, a sweet orderliness into the life of men.

And yet the blessed stillness of Saturday evening could not appease the troubled soul of Mironoff. It was torn asunder, entangled, perplexed; his memory suggested pictures of the past and overwhelmed him with a sense of the chaos of life. It was the first time he had felt any real mental disturbance. He must think, and the effort filled him with a strange fear. He left the window and inspected several times every corner of the room, as though hoping to find in the bluish dusk what it was that compelled him to meditate.

Queer: even when he closed his eyes, the darkness trembled: whirlwinds danced, arranging themselves in strange shapes, now in straight lines, now in circles, finally forming themselves

into tall pillars of black dust. The darkness became palpable, effervescent, and then unaccountably forced him again to wonder, "How am I going to order my life?"

Thought! What did it mean? Not long before his father's death, his mother had said to her husband one day, "You ought to do a bit of thinking, you fool. You haven't long to live!" The good man had replied with a smile:

"Do you know what thinking means? It means wiping away the dust. See, you have a dusting rag in your hand. It was clean once, and now it is dirty. Both you and I, Lydia, have done a good deal of thinking, and . . ."

His mother, once a careful housekeeper who prided herself on her work, was very angry at this, and began to scream:

"You call me a dirty rag? D'you mean my house is dirty?"

Two weeks after, Mironoff had discovered his mother lying on the kitchen floor with one shoulder against the stove. Propping herself precariously on one arm, she emitted low groans and grunts. Thinking she was still drunk, Mironoff stooped to assist her, but she snatched her arm away, and fell heavily at his feet. For four days she continued to moan and kept brand-

ishing her arm as though warding off something, and on the fifth fell out of bed, crept into a far corner of the room, and died. For a whole week strange persons fussed about the place from morning till night: the hunchbacked nursing-sister, the fat doctor who shouted orders and smoked incessantly, the yellow-bearded priest Boris who sat with his legs outstretched. Everyone asked Mironoff questions. Kallistrat the carpenter, whom everybody disliked, impertinently inquired of the boy:

"And now what are you going to do, you poor orphan?"

In Paris, dying and being buried are far simpler matters: the funeral arrangements are even interesting. Here they were unnecessary and dreadful. In Paris strange people didn't come to gloat over the body of the deceased. As for Kallistrat, in Paris he would never have been tolerated.

The day Mironoff's mother died, the carpenter took a pot of sour cream out into the street and dipping a brush into it began to paint his garden fence. Why? He was not drunk. He went through the performance with the utmost gravity. When someone inquired what he thought he was

doing, he calmly replied, "I am painting the fence."

"With sour cream?"

"I couldn't find any paint." And for ten minutes he worked in silence, conscientiously daubing the gray boards discolored by the sun. A small group of youngsters and men watched him. The performance was suddenly ended when Ivan Ivanovitch Rosanoff came up and kicked the pot, smashing it to pieces.

The doctor, in examining the body, had said in his offensive manner: "If she had not drunk so hard, she would have been good for another forty years."

And Mironoff remembered that though at the time the words had sounded crude, he had made a swift calculation: if she had lived that long, *he* would have been fifty-nine, and she would doubtless have gone on shouting at him all her life: "You fool! You're just like your father." Large-eyed, rough, half-drunk from the moment she got up, she would have rolled from room to room, dusting, killing flies, and filling the atmosphere with the smell of pickled onions and soaked apples, her favorite dishes. And she would have abused his father. She always did that, espe-

cially on holidays when he would hang his topographer's uniform over his gaunt and lanky body and go to town for a game of billiards. He was good at billiards, as he was at all things. In word and deed he was an exceptional man. His long, lanky figure, his thin unkempt beard and strange straggly little moustache, were vivid in his son's memory. He had a nasty habit of coughing and spitting. He used to tell the youthful Kostia marvelous tales about the Turks and General Skobeleff, the Caucasus, Khiva and Bukhara, his eyes alight with merriment. He was a carefree pilgrim, a wanderer over the face of the earth. Under his left eye was a red scar, the result of a wound (in the Turkish campaign) that wrinkled that side of his face: the eye itself seemed as though it were always peeping out at one. He never quarrelled with his wife, and seldom argued; instead, he would drive her to distraction by a sarcastic word, which made her bellow at him:

"You shut up, Mitka! God will punish you for your foolishness, you just wait and see!"

"God never punishes stupidity," he had answered, "God loves fools." These words had disturbed the lad. He remembered them often afterward. One day, when he was mending a

violin, the father had taken from the instrument a short round little stick. "This thing," he said, "is called the soul. In you, too, Lydia, there is a little spindle like this, put in you by the devil."

"Liar!" she replied, "my soul comes from God!"

On her Name Day one year, her husband on returning from church had presented her with several yards of cashmere for a new dress. Wrapped up in it was a loathsome picture called *The Death of a Sinner:* at the feet of a dying man stood a green devil, sticking out a fiery tongue, his lip curled in a sneer. She had laughed at first, but thinking about it later and having drunk a good deal at dinner, she suddenly burst out crying and wailing: "My misery! My cross!" In her rare moments of repose she called her husband a conjurer because he had made a music box that could play *The Reel, Mother Dear* and the national anthem. One day, when drunk, she had smashed the music box, and trampled the bits under her feet. Kostia had later gathered up the fragments and hidden them in the garret, and had often begged his father to mend the instrument, the miraculous contraption that could play by itself gay, sad or solemn tunes, but his father had replied:

"What nonsense! It's only a box. Don't bother me." And with a sigh as he thoughtfully played with the boy's ear, he added: "If she would only burst, drink herself to death, I'd be able to do some fine things." He liked to make delicate mechanical instruments, accordions and violins, to repair picture frames and the like, and when he worked he always sang:

> Seven sons, seven sons,
> What shall we do with seven sons?"

The most successful of his father's many contrivances was a globe. Kostia still had it: it was a present to him on graduating into his second term. Except for the lower half, it was an ordinary globe, but on this lower half (constructed out of a tin wash basin) he had burnt with acid, all the outlines of the oceans and hemispheres, continents and islands, skilfully coloring the various parts. The thing was held firmly in place by a steel comb, fixed with solder. The comb was so arranged that when the globe turned on its axis it would play a pretty tinkling tune: "Siskin, Siskin, where have you been?" Even his mother had liked this, and often turned the globe with childish joy, laughing her drunken laugh. But the cat had objected, and whenever

the tune began, she would scamper away. When he was bored, Kostia used to annoy the cat by turning the globe.

Yes, his father was on the whole a cheerful man, but now whenever Kostia remembered his jokes, they failed to bring him either solace or joy. He was even distressed.

In the year of his death the old man had started on a pilgrimage to a monastery. Before leaving, he had fixed to all the doors of his flat little devices made out of rubber balls and sticks of wood, which shrieked piercingly whenever a door was opened or closed. This drove his wife to distraction.

"Are you making fun of me?" she shouted, struck her husband across the face, and proceeded to demolish all the alarms. He had smiled and walked off jauntily into the garden, lain down on the grass under the lime-tree, laughed, and fallen into a restless sleep. Mironoff recalled how strangely his father had talked in his delirious slumber. He had gone out and sat by his side. A wave of compassion swelled in his heart as he scrutinized the thin gray face. The dear, queer man! He was incomprehensible. In that hour a sorrowful shadow was cast over his love for his father. At the same time a feeling of mis-

trust was born in him. He had received at the time one of those ineffaceable impressions that determine the course of a man's life. The bees droned heavily in the thick foliage, so that nothing else could be heard. It was a sultry summer day. High overhead swam the deep blue sky, a symphony of serene beauty. The boy had watched it for a long while, until his eyes smarted. He was awakened from his dream by the distant song of what he guessed to be a lark. From that day he found that he had to think in terms of sound; sounds echoed every thought that came to him and burst into wordless song.

During the last two weeks he had been unable to stifle his thoughts by sounds. The dust of memory invaded his brain, the dull voice of his father echoed, and the everlasting wrangling of his mother. He learned from her as a boy that she had been married before, to her second husband's employer. The first husband had once tried to shoot his successor. "My misfortune," was her comment, "that he missed you!"

And now Kostia was conscious that something dark and dangerous had been hidden in the lives of his parents, something perhaps even criminal. He was afraid to think of it, yet the thought persisted, until he became interested in books; from

these he learned that there were other more interesting mysteries in the world. They had opened a vista of beauty before him. He was bashful and awkward and had no friends. Since he was often subject to colds, he found ample time to read. It was during the long hours of reading that the miraculous city of Paris arose in a blue mist of faery magic out of the encumbering shadows.

His father had died in the spring-time. His mother behaved dreadfully: "There, Mitia, you see . . . I told you. . . ." The four years spent alone with the drunken woman had made him more introspective than ever. He found pleasure in fishing and long walks in the fields and woods, where he listened to the birds, the rustle of grass and leaves, and the stranger whisper of the wind. What he loved most was to hear the distant strains of the military band on holidays. He would stand and watch the soldiers as they drew near, puffing out their cheeks as they blew their horns and bugles; but after a time there was no fun even in this. He would then take with him on his excursions a French grammar, ponder it and try to remember what he had studied. But he had not a very good memory and the words became transmitted into groups

of meaningless though utterly beautiful sounds, into a sort of mystic blue music.

It was on Easter Sunday that he was for the first time conscious of Lisa Rosanoff. She was dressed that morning in a blue dress. She had just come out of church; the bells were ringing and the sun blazing splendidly. Small, slim, dainty and lovely as a flower, she seemed to reflect the azure of the heavens over her. Living just across the street, Mironoff had often seen her, but hitherto the girl had seemed merely thin and peaked, her face with its round staring eyes and pouting (or was it just weary?) lips, had not appealed to him. He had once thought she was almost as unattractive as himself. He knew that the girl was taking goat's milk as a cure; the odor was decidedly disagreeable.

That Easter morning he was filled with joyful amazement: how had he failed to notice that Lisa was beautiful? From that day he had made her the companion of his sky-blue dreams. She was a straw to which he clung in the swirling current of life, a life that was fearful and unfathomable. He had not the courage to become acquainted with the girl, but every day on his way home from the office he lingered as he passed her house, and after dinner he would sit by the window looking

out to see whether she might be anywhere visible. Sometimes she stepped out, and tripped lightly off toward the river, to join her father at the lumber yard. As she went down the street she clung close to the hedges, as though reserving the right to dart into a gateway if it became necessary to hide. A short braid of dark hair, tied with a sky-blue ribbon, dangled down her narrow little back. This girl had at least one thing in common with Mironoff: she evidently was afraid of people, and this brought her still closer to him. After he had watched her until she disappeared from view, he turned to the mirror and scrutinized, with a feeling of rebellion in his heart, his dark motionless eyes, set wide apart; in the left was a slight squint that made the eye appear to be peeping at the protuberant waxen ear behind it; his upper lip, shadowed faintly with down, contrasted strikingly with his parchment-colored ill-formed nose; his hair was a mass of rebellious locks. It seemed that everything about him grew in the wrong direction; he was like a tree planted in barren soil. His arms were too long, his fingers too bony, his mouth too large, and his teeth so irregular that he was afraid to smile. It was not pleasant to look at the reflection in the glass. He had

noticed that if one looks long enough, dark circles appear round the eyes and the reflection seems to fade. Now it seemed to him that he himself was fading at the same time.

Not long before his mother's death he had surprised himself by asking her: "Mother, why don't you ask Lisa's parents to allow me to marry her?" He had blushed and become frightened because he had unwittingly revealed his secret. But that day she had not been drinking, and had little to say. She had merely looked at him contemptuously and called him a fool. A fine husband he would make! And clenching her large swollen fingers she brandished her fist in the air, saying that a husband should behave like *that!* The more he thought about his mother the stranger and coarser did she seem: he could not forget her huge misshapen body, her large dull eyes. He wanted to wipe the dust from her shadow.

The blue dusk in the room had thickened. It was warm. Over beyond the river, the evening star shone brightly in the rose-tinted sky. A cart rumbled along the street, loaded with furniture—mattresses, flower-pots and the rest; under an artificial palm a girl reclined, dressed in a red blouse, a white shawl tied round her head.

She was sitting on some bundles holding on her knees a cage with a blackbird in it. A few gaily colored toys fell from the cart and rolled in the dust. An old man, his head tilted forward and flourishing a whip, trod by the side of the heavy thick-legged horse.

"Well," he shouted to the girl, "who do you go to? Where shall we make our complaint?"

"The old fool!" thought Mironoff.

Artamon, the teamster from the lumber yard, thick-set and heavy as a bear, came down the street. His shaggy countenance was disfigured by a hare-lip, his mouth formed a triangle revealing in all their savagery a set of yellow teeth. With him was the tall and slender carpenter Kallistrat, bare-footed, wearing an apron smeared with paint and glue, a dark leather band round his fair curly hair. His golden whiskers made a brave show under his hawk-like nose. As he passed Mironoff's window he twisted the strands of his beard round his fingers and, looking sidewise at his companion, murmured: "Touchy chap!"

"Well, you better leave him alone," returned Artamon, "let him be touchy by himself!" And, passing on, they disappeared in a reddish cloud of dust. Everyone in the street was struck with

admiration at the superhuman physique of the teamster; everyone feared him just as everyone feared the mischievous impudence of the carpenter.

Mironoff closed his eyes. It seemed as though that made him invisible to others.

Often he dreamed strange dreams after a sleepless night: once he dreamed he was on a broad road illuminated by bonfires, and along the road stretched an interminable file of marching coffeepots, all the same size and all with long thin legs, looking like spiders. Again, a small hunchbacked monster paced the street, driving in nails so close to each other that the road looked like the scales of a monster. And again, a huge fish swam along the river swallowing the reflection of the moon, which sauntered gracefully among the rocks, swaying to and fro like a pendulum; the sky was weirdly black. The dreams troubled him, absurd as they were.

Finally rid of the presence of his mother, and with only the cook, who was quiet as a cat, he was still uneasy. He felt that everything about him was asking, "Well, what are you going to do now?"

Mironoff noticed that all the people in the street looked at him in precisely the same way as the

inanimate objects in his own room, as if they expected something of him.

One Sunday, after sunset, he was seated on a barge in the river, fishing for perch. The barge was half-submerged, and almost surrounded by ice. In the distance he could hear the brass trumpets of the band. The slow ripple of the water and the strains of music soothed his troubled mind; warm waves of sound lifted him aloft, gently, soothingly. To his keen senses the river hummed a bass that nearly drowned out all other sounds. His ear was sensitive as his eye, and the subtle sound seemed to become visible. He was so intent upon listening that he was startled to see a boat draw up alongside, and hear a voice inquire:

"Are they biting?"

He started and drew his line out of the water. A perch wriggled on the hook.

"See! I've brought you luck! Got many?"

"Three—with this."

The newcomer was Lisa Rosanova, clad in a mauve-colored dress, her hair tied with a bow of sky-blue silk. She was sitting in the stern of the little boat, while her friend Claudia, a fat black-haired girl in a red blouse and dark-blue skirt, was at the oars. Claudia lazily manœuvred

these in order to prevent the boat from floating with the current. Lisa smiled. Mironoff tried to smile back at her, but remembering his teeth, pressed his lips tight together.

"Let's go on!" said Lisa after a moment, and Claudia sat back and dropping the oars deep into the water, pulled. One oar broke and the water splashed Mironoff's feet.

"Oh, excuse me!"

Lisa broke into a light tinkling laugh, while Mironoff dangled his wet feet in embarrassment. Stupid of me, he thought to himself as he shook the water from his clothes; anyone else would have been glad of this chance to talk with her, but I—Maybe they even splashed me on purpose, in order to strike up an acquaintance?

Meantime the boat floated down-stream with the current, the oar-locks screeching in mockery. Mironoff shook himself, emptied his pail, took up his rod and fish, and went home. All the way back he pitied himself. As he approached his house he noticed that the brown paint on the front, the green shutters and the gate posts was fading and here and there peeling off.

"That must be painted," he mused.

Early on the morning of the following Wednesday a bald little fellow with an aggressive and

sarcastic manner, began to scrape the house, while his assistant, a snub-nosed youngster smeared with paint, helped him. The old man sang softly as he worked:

He went away without saying goodbye

The boy chimed in with his shrill treble:

And gave his love to another.

Mironoff, roused from sleep, lay in his warm bed and thought: "How silly. The old fellow's too old to sing about love, and the other is too young. Why the deuce do house painters always sing when they work?"

A few days later, the painter was instructed to tint the façade sky-blue, and when Ivan Ivanovitch Rosanoff came by he stopped in the middle of the street and exclaimed in a stern voice:

"What are you doing over there?"

"I'm doing what I'm ordered to do," replied the other.

"But why blue?"

"I've been told to paint it blue."

"It spoils the appearance of the whole street."

"What's it to me?"

"Stupid!"

"I'm not the stupid one."

Mironoff, who was watering the flowers on his window-sill, had overheard this conversation, and was deeply hurt. Why did sky-blue spoil the appearance of the street, and why was he stupid? Little chance of that man's allowing me to have his daughter! He quickly came out into the street, looked at the other houses, whose fronts were washed out and faded by sun and rain, and saw gray fences joining one with the other. A line of white willows, with dusky foliage, descended straight to the river in two long lines, like beggars, seven on one side, ten on the other. Among the seven stood the one-storied brick house belonging to Rosanoff, its four windows peering grimly into the street. Looking up at his own house, he saw that the triangle under the gable was already painted. It shone pleasantly with an oily lustre, like soft silk. There stood Rosanoff, and just touching his cap with one forefinger, he turned to Mironoff, saying:

"It's unpractical, that color."

"But it's beautiful."

"And expensive."

"But it wears well."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"The painter says so."

"Painters are liars," said Rosanoff sternly and

turned away, offering to the sun the broad expanse of his benevolent countenance and silvery beard. Mironoff had had no time to ask why all painters were liars. He went indoors, took a book from the shelf and sat down by the window. Rosanoff reappeared an instant later with a broom and began sweeping the litter from under his windows out into the middle of the street. The painter shouted, "Hey, what are you raising all that dust for? You'll spoil this paint." Without deigning to reply, Rosanoff went on sweeping. Mironoff knew well enough that it was done purposely. And that hurt. He got up, went into his garden and sat down under an aged apple-tree.

"No, he won't let me marry his daughter. Why did I have the house painted anyway?" He could still hear the painter and Rosanoff arguing. He knew he ought to go out and put an end to it, but he felt paralysed. People were always pestering each other—. He remained seated until supper time. That night it was stifling hot and he could not sleep. The moon was inconsiderately bright and the dogs kept up an incessant din. On the floor near his bed was a golden yellow square of light, over which the window bars cast clear shadows. Suddenly

three other lines moved across the spot and then the outline of a man. It was as though a lamplighter had glided past in the sky, carrying a ladder on one shoulder. Mironoff heard a rustling sound, then words. He pushed back his blanket, sat up and watched the window. There was a ladder immediately outside. Evidently the painter had forgotten to take it down and someone was trying to steal it. Mironoff jumped out of bed, approached the window, and looked up: on the top of the ladder was a man: he could see the bare feet. He was rather startled, and very much surprised. He crept noiselessly out of the room, went downstairs and walked quickly into the street.

There, in full view, stood a man on the top of the ladder, dipping a short brush into a paint pot that hung from his belt, hurriedly daubing at the wall round the garret window.

"Who's that?" said Mironoff in an undertone. With uncanny swiftness the man almost slid down the ladder, paint spilling from the pot and streaming down the walls. A strong smell of tar permeated the tepid air. Snatching up his ladder, the man tried to run away, but Mironoff had already recognised him. It was Kallistrat.

Standing back a little, he looked up again and read what had been written under the gable. He saw large letters, sprawling and indistinct, spelling the words, THE HOUSE. Dark streams of tar softly trickled down from every letter, and occasionally he could hear a heavy thud as the large drops struck the ground below. The carpenter, holding his ladder on one shoulder, stood some distance away.

"Look here," began Mironoff, "what did you do that for?" The other made no answer.

"Incredible! Can't you mess around with anything but sour cream or tar?" Kallistrat laughed. There was something sinister in that laugh; it sounded like a cross between the cackling of a hen and the bark of a puppy. It was uncanny. Incomprehensible. The stifling air, the strange glint of the moonlight on the windows—queer—like a bad dream.

"You'd better not try to fight," said the carpenter, "or I'll give you a proper hiding."

"I have no intention of fighting," said Mironoff, moving toward his gate. Kallistrat, laying the ladder down against the fence, stepped toward Mironoff.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked. There

was a new note in his voice; it reminded him of his father: he seemed to threaten and caress at the same time.

"No, I'm not angry, but . . . Why ruin things like that?" The carpenter now stood at his side and lightly struck him on the shoulder.

"Don't be offended, Mironoff. I'll make it right for you. The tar won't stick to oil, anyway. That's why it runs so. I didn't do it right. I ought to have mixed soot with paraffin——"

"But why?"

"For fun, don't you see? It was a queer idea your painting your house blue. No one does that, don't you see?" The carpenter bit his lower lip, jerked his head to one side and half closing his eyes looked interrogatively at the sky. He was evidently trying to think something out. He then pulled a wooden cigarette-case from his pocket, struck a match, lit his cigarette and threw the match up so cleverly that the fire continued to burn. With one hand on Mironoff's shoulder, he compelled him to sit down on a bench beside the gate and, himself sitting by his side, began to address him in a patronizing manner:

"Of course, I understand your intention; you want to seem different from other people. You think that because you are independent and have

no family, you can do as you like, don't you? Do all sorts of queer things? But I advise you to stop, Mironoff: there are only two of us who can play that game, I and the Devil. You are still a nonentity, and so far as God's concerned——"

"What God?" inquired Mironoff sullenly.

"Same old God, my boy. There's only one. Have you forgotten? See here now: suppose your mother is dying—well, any human being, let's say. All the neighbors seem interested. They come buzzing about. Well, all *I* have to do is to start painting the fence with sour cream and they all hustle over to watch me. See?"

"No. I see nothing. It all sounds like rubbish to me."

"Well, you're no good if you don't see. And yet, you want to push forward. Let me tell you, you've got to be able to understand rubbish as well as anything else. Now, can you think up something like that sour cream idea of mine? There—you see! Now, I've been tested, tried for my pranks Why, I once poured paraffin into a letter box, and threw in a lighted match. The letters were all burned up, and no one ever suspected I did it. It got into the papers. People wondered why anyone would set fire to letters. It was all foolishness, of course, youthful high

spirits. Why, I used to lie awake nights thinking what I could do that was different. Even now I like to mystify people. They're so funny! They go along so quietly, and then all of a sudden something strange happens. They're upset, puzzled."

The carpenter twirled the ends of his moustache, passed the tip of his tongue over his lips, half-closed one eye and, looking up at the moon, said with a sigh:

"A beautiful star, but dogs don't care for it."

His eyes intent upon the sharp lines of the face of the carpenter and listening to every word he said, Mironoff wanted to do two things: to ask questions, and to say something insulting and leave the fellow. But what he said was:

"Maybe the dogs think it's a fox?"

"No one knows what dogs think," replied the carpenter with a grim smile, and went on talking as though he were preaching a sermon; but his words became more and more vague and incomprehensible. His boasting made a considerable impression on Mironoff, the words he uttered were like the words he read in the French grammar, dark and wonderful. Round him the moon-

light flooded the thick foliage of the willows and touched his curly head with gold. His eyes looked green, mocking and sly, the pupils seemed to have been pricked with a needle. One could not trust a man with such eyes. The fellow was obviously making game of him.

"I think you're a lunatic!" The words came from Mironoff in spite of himself, and surprised him.

"Really?" asked the carpenter, laughing.

"What was it you were writing up there on the house?"

"I just began, but you interrupted me. What I wanted to write was 'The House of a Lunatic.' Why, everyone in the street would have roared with laughter in the morning. See here, Mironoff," he continued, tapping the other on the knee, "suppose you let me have ten roubles?"

Mironoff drew away angrily.

"Now wait, don't be offended. I have a wonderful idea. I rather like you. The way you behaved just now: anyone else would have made a terrible fuss. Well, anyway, I want to do you a good turn." He had become serious, though Mironoff was now quite convinced that he was mad. That would account for his mischievous

ways. He smiled to himself, for this notion comforted him, and looking into the sky listened to the soft words of Kallistrat:

"I'll buy paint and paint your house so that the whole town will positively gasp. I've been longing to do something of that kind."

"But why?"

The carpenter seemed not to have heard, and continued:

"I tell you, there's nothing I don't know how to do, but I hate to work. That's because what I can get is not to my taste. Now, *you*——"

"Very well," agreed Mironoff, for he realized that Kallistrat would be up to some other prank if he refused him his way in this. But immediately the carpenter drew away and looked at Mironoff in amazement.

"Well! That's—Well, you'll not repent. I'll return in the morning." He turned and walked briskly away, then stopping as though he had stumbled, exclaimed to himself: "That's it! How they'll gasp!" Mironoff could see the black outline of the fellow clearly silhouetted against the silvery river. Then he turned a corner and disappeared. Mironoff stepped out into the middle of the street again, glanced up at his house and read the words "The House," then

turned, went indoors and retired, thinking to himself:

"Yes, a lunatic, and probably a rascal into the bargain."

Early in the morning the cook came to say that the carpenter had arrived and wanted money. So it was not a dream. He gave the old woman the ten roubles and sank back into bed again. Ought he not to bring an action against the fellow?

This was not a bad idea: he kept thinking of it as he left the house on his way to the office and noticed the great black smudges. The tar had run down in places to the ground, so that the word House was hardly decipherable. He walked quickly down the street, uncomfortably conscious of the smiles of passers-by. Lisa, too, was doubtless laughing.—There are no wooden houses in Paris, though!

When he returned at five in the evening, he saw from a distance a group of youngsters by his gate, and a ladder propped against the front of the house. From the top of it hung a queer-looking tin can. With one leg inside the garret window, the carpenter swayed to and fro. Shaking his cane, Mironoff quickened his pace and

running up to the ladder, shouted at Kallistrat:

"See here. What the devil! I forbid you——"

The youngsters, who had greeted him at first with shrieks of excitement, were silent and drew away toward the fence. Mironoff was quivering with anger as he looked up at the wicked eyes of Kallistrat. He was ready to burst with anger and shame. The carpenter slid down the ladder with extraordinary agility, pushed Mironoff aside with his shoulder and pointed aloft with his brush.

"What are you shouting for? Don't you like it, eh?"

The frame of the garret window had been removed and on the wall to one side of it was a crude picture of a huge monster painted yellow and white, with red fins, but without a tail; the large protruding red eyes were surrounded with white circles. The thing was peering into the gaping window. Its snout was a cross between that of a fish and a sheep.

"There will be three of them," explained the carpenter, "one opposite and another on top. The window will be painted to look like a fish-trap." He was apparently drunk. His hand trembled, but Mironoff smelt no liquor on his

breath. Maybe the paint was too strong? Kallistrat was smeared from head to toe. His gray eyes burned with a strange light.

"Well," he asked, "isn't it lovely?"

The youngsters had begun to jeer again. A beggar walked up to Mironoff, made a deep bow and extended a filthy hand. A shaggy dog was with him, its tongue hanging out and its head on one side critically regarding the scene, as though it, too, were perplexed by the brilliant fresco above. Amid the din Rosanoff's voice was heard:

"Is this going to be a side-show, eh?"

Mironoff turned quickly round, as Rosanoff continued: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man. You must put an end to this indecent behavior!" Mironoff felt weak. He did not understand. He turned to Kallistrat, and asked plaintively:

"Did you hear that?"

The carpenter showed his contempt by a gesture, as he answered:

"Everyone has a right to paint his house as he likes," and turned again toward the ladder. Mironoff held him back.

"Please don't go on. People will laugh."

"I'll see they don't laugh at me!"

"But after all, this is my house," urged Mironoff, who began to feel terrified.

"Tell them to go to the devil!" said the carpenter, now half-way up the ladder. "Oh, they'll gasp, you just see!"

Overwhelmed with dizziness, anger and shame, Mironoff went indoors and determined to lodge a complaint. He sat at his table, trying to think, and began to write. But the ink was thick, the pen was bad, and he found himself writing "dement" instead of "detriment." He threw away the pen and got up with the intention of going over to see Rosanoff and asking his advice. He put on his Sunday clothes, brushed his hair, left the house cautiously in order to avoid Kallistrat, and crossed the street. But as he looked over his shoulder from Rosanoff's front yard he perceived that the carpenter had seen him and was now standing bolt upright on the ladder.

"He's only ruining the outside today," thought Mironoff, "but tomorrow he may set fire to it. What am I to do?"

"Well, what do you want?" asked Rosanoff with a growl as he stood on his porch smoothing his shaggy eyebrows. Taking off his cap,

Mironoff hurriedly explained his errand. He was offended and at the same time ashamed. A ray of sunlight shone directly in his eyes, making him shift uneasily from one foot to the other. To make matters worse, his new suspenders squeaked. Rosanoff looked at him like a new priest in his pulpit preparing to begin his sermon. Was there something wrong about his appearance, he wondered? Why was he not asked to come indoors?

"I hardly see the purpose," began Rosanoff scornfully, "of your hiring that rascal over there. If he lived in the country, the people would have sent him to Siberia long ago. Justice slumbers. People are allowed to do just as they like."

Inside the house, through the window, Mironoff saw a familiar face. He was seized with the desire to say something important, striking, so he blurted out: "I think he's mad."

"Well, it's your own affair. Go on thinking. I have nothing more to say."

This was most embarrassing. With a deep bow, that made the suspenders squeak worse than before, he stole another glance at the window. Was it possible that Lisa had heard the squeak?

Then she disappeared. How silly! He came out again into the street. Kallistrat had descended and stood there pulling his yellow beard, looking up in admiration at his work.

"No good," he stated, "it's all wrong."

"All wrong," echoed Mironoff.

"Too bad!" With a curse he went on to explain: "And I had such a wonderful idea. I wanted that fish—I like fish, but I ought to have stuck to flowers. I'm very good at that. Hares, too——"

A ray of hope came to Mironoff, and he took Kallistrat by the arm and led him to the gate. "Look here," he said.

"What am I to look at? I'm ashamed of myself, Mironoff. Have you got some vodka? Good! Now I promise to paint it all over for you. Don't worry, old chap!"

The hope vanished. He called to Pavlovna through the kitchen window to bring vodka, and sat down on the bench, the carpenter squatting on a step below, his elbows resting on his knees, his fingers stuck in the great shock of hair. The cook brought out a bottle of vodka and a piece of meat-pie.

"Tell me, Mironoff," said Kallistrat, "have I really made a laughing-stock of you? Here I've

spent your money, and yet you are decent to me. You give me food and drink——"

"I don't know," said Mironoff, who was busy thinking how he could dissuade Kallistrat from going on with the work.

The carpenter gulped down two glasses of vodka. "People," he said philosophically, "are either spiders—or fools. A kind man is always a bit of a fool."

This angered Mironoff, but he could think of nothing to say but what his father had once said: "God loves fools."

"You're right, you poor orphan. God is not without a certain craftiness. I've thought it all out. You're very fortunate to have found me. I'll be your friend for life. Why, you have caused my soul to blush for shame. It's your meekness that's done it—." His greenish gray eyes grew moist and his countenance became ecstatic. He pressed his fingers into the corners of his eyes, forcing out the tears. Though he was at first merely bored, Mironoff found that the genuine sentiment expressed by these tears was touching. The carpenter then wiped his fingers with his handkerchief, quite drenched in vodka, and looked up blinking strangely. Mironoff saw great beads of perspiration on the

man's forehead and without realizing what he did, took his own handkerchief and wiped them off. It was now Kallistrat's turn for amazement.

"Why did you do that?' he asked, smiling.

"Perspiration."

The carpenter laughed softly, and stamped.

"Am I a baby that needs to have its face wiped?"

"I didn't think."

"No, you're a—well, never mind. I'll paint it over in the morning, don't worry."

"I beg you, don't do that."

"What!"

"No, no, don't."

The carpenter heaved a sigh, rose, and offered his hand. "Forgive me," he said, and sauntered away limping, as though one of his legs had suddenly gone lame. He stopped at the gate, peered back into the yard, turned again and carefully closing the gate, disappeared. Mironoff sat motionless. He was utterly perplexed. He tried, he wanted only to forget. Though the problem of the painting of the house had been quietly settled, he was not happy.

"What an impossible man!" he thought.

Late in the evening, Mironoff came out into the garden and lay in the grass under the apple-tree,

looking at the sky through a network of leaves. Why was it that this stifling heaviness should come from that icy blue chalice of the heavens? The pale crescent moon was rapidly declining over the tip of the tree. The voices of men weary with labor and heat floated to him from a distance. The sound annoyed him: he liked silence, unbroken, when he could feel his body borne aloft on the wings of thought, sweet harmonious thought, with no sound to interrupt. At such moments the earth and everything on it seemed to dissolve, floating off in slow waves and circles and disappearing utterly into space. He himself seemed to echo every sound in his disembodied spirit. Nothing was so marvelous as this loosening of the fleshly bonds, this mingling with the odors, as it were, of earth and stars, of the Supreme Being, infinitely tender, the source of intoxicating music. The idea of God on a golden throne, surrounded by Cherubim and Seraphim singing Hosannahs failed to satisfy him. The God worshipped in the temples of men, millions of whom daily invoked His name for help, was not his God. He vaguely suspected that this God had long since forsaken men, and a new God, a mocker, a clever scamp very much like the Devil, had taken his place. When

he tried to visualize the maker of the music of the world, his virgin mind evoked the image of a nude woman emerging from a blue mist, that set him tingling with a tremulous desire; his heart beat faster and he felt as though he were rapidly falling to the earth from a great height: the symphony of sounds ceased and during this eerie flight he recalled all the young girls and women who had ever entered his life. This sensation he rarely experienced, but when it came it was unpleasant, fearful, shameful. He never consciously evoked the image of the woman of the starry heights.

On this particular evening he was unable to produce the sensation of levitation which had always been so easy. In spite of himself other ideas came to him, questions were asked him, demanding answers. *Had* Lisa heard the screech of his new suspenders? Her father was a disagreeable person who hated his fellow-beings, judging them with severity, interfering in their lives. Doubtless that was why he was universally respected. . . . How was one to live in order to keep others from interfering? The figure of the carpenter rose clearly before him, demanding explanations. How stupid! Mironoff closed his eyes in an effort to forget, made

himself more comfortable and began to recite in an undertone the dialogue from a play he had just been reading:

"Oh, yes, in a way.
A bull can be pleasanter than an eagle.
Bull? You mean me?
Yes, sir, with your permission.
I am insulted.
Well, what of it?
I am insulted, I say.
It seems to me that Nature has insulted you, far more cruelly than I have.
Nature has made me a nobleman.
Then it is the nobility that is insulted."

"The yard is choked with weeds. It's been neglected!" It was the carpenter who had spoken. Kallistrat stood at Mironoff's side, wearing a loose shirt, the tail of which dangled round his trousers. He was barefoot, and by the look of his hair you would have thought he had just risen from bed. Mironoff raised himself on one elbow.

"How in the world did you——?"

"I climbed over the fence. I really must tell Artamoshka to look after the garden and yard. He likes that kind of work. And we can let him play around here in the evenings." Kneeling

before Mironoff, Kallistrat extended a hand to him, saying: "Here's what's left of the money. I paid six roubles for the paint and the two brushes. I'll give you them if you like. You may be able to use them."

"I don't want them," said Mironoff with a touch of annoyance.

"Well, neither do I," and the carpenter laid the money on the ground, sat down by Mironoff's side and looked him in the eyes.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"About girls, eh?"

"No."

"You must be careful with the girls," he pursued, picking a dry weed and scratching his forehead. "One of the bold kind will soon get the upper hand, and with the soft clinging variety you'd both soon be under water."

"I won't answer him," said Mironoff to himself, rocking to and fro on the grass, "then he'll go."

"I've been thinking a lot about you, Mironoff. You know, you've touched me, penetrated me through and through. Disturbed my peace of mind. What was that you were mumbling when I came, sorcery?"

"Oh, nothing: some poetry."

"I'm surprised, Mironoff."

"I don't want to surprise anyone."

"But you do." This was spoken almost as a threat. What could one say to such a man?

"It is very hot," ventured Mironoff.

"It is. But tell me what you are thinking of?"

"I don't like to think. I like everything to be quiet and restful." He tried to appear angry, but he felt guilty. "You see," he added, "how clear and quiet the sky is, but when the clouds—." He did not complete the sentence, conscious that though he was speaking in a loud voice the words had a plaintive sound. The carpenter, meantime, stealthily looking up into the heavens, remarked:

"The sky, Mironoff, is empty. That's why it's quiet."

"But what about the sun and moon and stars? Maybe there's something there we don't see?"

The carpenter shook his head dubiously. "I don't suppose you believe in God," he said, "you don't go to church."

Mironoff wanted to say something offensive, but could only mutter:

"My father did not believe in God."

"There are lots of people like that."

"He said that all thoughts and ideas served only to cast a shadow over everything."

"You don't say! He said that?"

"Yes, and now I can see for myself: thoughts are like worms. You dig them in the ground; they begin to squirm and wriggle——"

The carpenter was now pulling up blades of grass, listening attentively.

"Come to think of it," he said, "there are really two souls in you: one that's wise, and one that mixes everything up. I don't want to think. The soul abhors thought."

"There you're wrong, Mironoff."

"But what is there to know?" He thought he might frighten the carpenter, perhaps even offend him, drive him away for good and all. "There is nothing we don't know: people are born, marry, have children, and die. There are fires, thefts, murders. Circuses. Church processions. Somebody's wife elopes. Drunken brawls. Sour cabbage cooking, cucumbers being salted. Gambling. My God, what is it all to me!"

"Well," asked the carpenter, "what do you want?"

"Quiet."

"Then you ought to have been born deaf. It's hard to make you out, Mironoff."

"I don't ask you to make me out." Was this offensive? he wondered, looking stealthily at the carpenter, who quietly gesticulated with his hands, watching the shadow that fell from the tree. Mironoff, with a sigh, extended his hands toward the rays from the moon. They both sat this way for some time, hands stretched out like blind beggars. It was the carpenter who first broke the silence:

"No, Mironoff, nothing you can say or do surprises me. Words can't, and as for your blue house, why that only makes me laugh."

"Confound you! Go to the devil! Why are you forcing yourself on me?"

But Kallistrat only smiled, shook his head and winked:

"Temper, eh?" And he smiled with infinite good-humor, readjusted the leather band on his forehead, lighted a cigarette, and slowly puffed the blue smoke into the still air. "I understand, Mironoff, you're bored. Your youth is to blame for that. You're not used to life yet. You must have pleasures. Girls are all very well in their way, but for a serious man, what they have to give doesn't endure. Indeed, there are very few sources of enjoyment anywhere." The dictatorial tone in which this was spoken again aroused

Mironoff's ire: such things from an illiterate workingman!

"Everything must be changed!" he went on.

"In politics, you mean?" asked Mironoff.

"No. I have no interest in politics. I am aiming to create a work out of my soul, something perfect, different from anything else, that will make people gasp."

"Why not bite the Governor's ear?" suggested Mironoff.

"What did you say?" asked the carpenter, blinking his eyes.

"Bite the Governor. In church, during the service. Everyone will gasp at that."

"Don't be angry," said Kallistrat, striking his knee with his hand. "You are an interesting chap, I do declare. A bit muddle-headed, but interesting. Everyone in this world is bored, and wants to do something to surprise himself and others, but the trouble is there's no opportunity. And people don't know how to go about it. Now, you'd better stop trying to think of it. Your mind doesn't work right. And you don't know how to explain yourself. Go to bed. He who sleeps, wants not."

Poking the butt of his cigarette in the soft earth, he jumped up, and without saying good-

bye made his way to the fence, repeating in a tone of mockery, "He who sleeps, wants not."

Listening to the creaking of the fence as Kallistrat climbed over it, Mironoff kept thinking, "He won't come again—he's offended. That was an inspiration of mine, telling him to bite the Governor."

He pictured to himself the vast bald head and protuberant ears of His Excellency, emerging out of a cloud of blue incense at church; he saw the carpenter steal up cautiously and seize one crimson ear with his teeth. The congregation rises in consternation with one great gasp. The candles flicker as the rash carpenter is seized, dragged off, and given a thrashing——

Mironoff burst out laughing, but suddenly stopped on hearing a noise over by the fence. It was probably Kallistrat, playing the spy on the other side. He rose, and pretending to cough, slipped into the house without once looking back.

Next morning, on stepping out into the street he discovered that the monster by the garret window had been painted over with a heavy coat of blue, but of so dark a shade as to make the windows look unnaturally heavy. The splotches of tar that had disfigured the façade were also all

covered over, but here again the new paint had ruined the appearance of the house.

"So he has kept his word!" thought Mironoff, and wondered how it had been accomplished. It must have been hard. With a shake of the head, he went in to dinner. He had scarcely sat down when the front gate banged and the teamster Artamon, a scythe and a spade swung over one shoulder, rolled heavily into the yard, stopped on the porch, laid down his implements, crossed himself, spat on his hands, took up his scythe again and swung it as lightly as though it had been his whip. He descended into the yard and began cutting the grass and weeds. Mironoff rose hurriedly, and hiding behind the window, looked on.

"Why, they seem to think the place belongs to them!" he mused. He could clearly discern the fierce-looking teeth of the teamster glistening in the triangle of his mouth; the crafty bear's eyes, almost invisible under his overarching forehead; the large nose nearly buried in the moustache, and the queer straggly beard. It seemed unnatural. Artamon had practically no face at all. He plodded on, as though cutting his way through an invisible though almost impenetrable thicket.

"So that's it. Kallistrat uses Artamon in order to make people gasp——"

It was not long before Artamon had cut all the high grass. He paused in a corner of the yard, held his scythe like a lance, looked up at the sky and crossed himself again. Mironoff took him a glass of vodka, a cutlet, and a loaf of bread, and thanked him.

"Thank you," repeated the teamster in an almost inarticulate murmur, threw back his head, tossed the vodka into his misshapen mouth, poked in half the loaf of bread together with the meat, glanced at what was left and then forced that in after the rest, swallowed it all and sat down.

"Now for the back garden," he said thickly.

"How much are you charging for this job?"

"Nothing. I'm doing it for the fun of it." And he trudged off.

Looking into the garden an hour later, Mironoff saw that all the grass had been mowed. Artamon was reclining under the apple-tree, stroking the roots with his hand. Catching sight of Mironoff, the teamster shouted,

"Hey there, you!"

Mironoff went out to him, but when he was

some distance off, he stopped in alarm at the tone of Artamon's voice.

"You're a fine landlord! See that lichen! And all these caterpillars! These trunks should have been sprayed. These trees ought to have been dug out around the roots; they need fertilizer. You're a fine one, you are!"

As Mironoff approached, the teamster extended one hand, the fingers outstretched, covered with the slime of many dead caterpillars. Mironoff shuddered with disgust and drew back.

"What are you afraid of? Me? Why, I'm your friend. Kallistrat told me to come over. What are you shaking for? You're queer, you and the rest of 'em——"

He spoke very loud, and the disagreeable impression of his speech was intensified by his lisp, which was not unlike that of a young child.

"I'll make it right," he continued. "I like to work." He wiped his hand on one boot, groaning as he stooped. Mironoff regarded him with awe and, not knowing just what to say, timidly inquired:

"Where is the carpenter?"

"Oh, Kallistrat? Don't go near him. He's mad, the old rascal, because you didn't let him paint your house." Opening his mouth as far

as he could, the teamster sighed three times. It sounded like the winter wind moaning in a chimney, and made Mironoff want to pull his head down between his shoulders like a turtle.

"You are stronger than he," he said.

"Of course I am. I was once in the circus. I wrestled. The dirty dogs broke my fingers, or I'd have had them all down. They beat me by cunning, not by strength." He turned and plunged his spade into the hard earth as though it were made of butter, turning over the dark sod about the roots of the apple-tree.

"Everybody's afraid of me here because I'm so strong. But I'm a quiet fellow, kind to everybody. I like to talk to people. Of course my voice scares them. . . . Last year my cart ran over a man—his leg it was. I was arrested. When I was tried the judge screamed at me: 'Don't shout so,' he said, but I couldn't help it. When he understood that, he acquitted me."

"Are you married?"

"Good God, is any woman fool enough to marry me? Look at my lip." Mironoff knew that the townspeople regarded all peasants with mingled hostility and contempt. Both his father and mother had inculcated that attitude in him from his earliest childhood. But as for

Artamon he felt only fear and astonishment, and a vague sense of hope. If he made friends with this peasant, then the carpenter——

"Working, is he?" the resounding voice of Kallistrat boomed from above. He was sitting on one of the fence posts, smoking a cigarette, his legs dangling, his head encircled by a wreath of blue smoke.

"Hang it all!" muttered Mironoff to himself, "is he going to start ragging me again?"

"Look here, Krinkoff," he began, straightening himself up to his full height, "now what do you want? I don't care to—." But he could not speak clearly. Something caught in his throat.

"What don't you care to—?" inquired the carpenter.

"You'd better stop! I'll bring a complaint."

"Against me? What for?"

The impassive attitude of the carpenter irritated him, and Mironoff stamped his foot as he shrieked:

"I don't care to have you digging and cutting my grass!"

Lightly as a bird, Kallistrat slid down from his position, seized Mironoff by the shoulder and

giving him a gentle shake, spoke in impressive tones:

"Pull yourself together, d'you hear? Are you mad? Here you have people working for you for nothing. You ought to thank them."

Mironoff was ashamed of his sudden burst of temper. He felt as though he had been put in his place by the carpenter's hand. The teamster, standing to one side, opened his mouth wider than ever, and seemed to be waiting for something else to happen.

"I see," muttered Mironoff.

"You see, but nevertheless you yell."

"Of course, I'm very grateful——"

"Well, you ought to be!" and the carpenter gave him a gentle push with his finger, and walked over to Artamon.

"Tie up those twigs, understand? And throw away those dead raspberry bushes."

"It's true," thought Mironoff, "they are working for nothing," and to show his gratitude he decided to invite them to a meal. Half an hour later the three of them were sitting at the kitchen table. The kettle was boiling on the stove, the vodka sparkled in the decanter, and on the table were plates of pickled mushrooms and sour

cabbage. Artamon drank vodka and tea, very much as a calf sucks milk, and gobbled his food, grunting and snorting, while the carpenter extracted with his fork the tenderest mushrooms from the plate before him, lifted his glass with two fingers, and turning it to the light, wrinkling his nose and half closing his eyes, drank it down with a cluck. Every gesture was executed with the utmost ease and nimbleness. An unpleasant fellow, but withal very interesting. *Was* he quite right in his mind? Perhaps only an abnormally crafty man.

"If I like anyone I'll give him pleasure," he was saying, as he held his glass with two fingers and spread out the other three. "But I am forced to add, I don't care much for people. They're all fools."

"Ugh, you devil!" muttered Artamon, leaning back against the wall, his huge chest sticking out absurdly.

"Now, I'm a clever fellow," continued Kallistrat. "I'm capable, I can do anything because I know how. Simple things don't interest me——"

"Devil!"

Mironoff drank two glasses of vodka, though he did not relish the liquor, and soon felt as

though his brain were swimming in a fog. He listened in silence to the boastful words of the carpenter, feeling only an exasperating sensation of boredom. He was deeply offended, too, when Artamon fell asleep and began snorting, though he waked up a moment later with a guilty start. Kallistrat meantime twirled the ends of his golden moustache, and addressed himself to the teamster:

"Now, home you go! You've had your fill, you camel."

At which Artamon rose obediently and went away. Kallistrat expressed a wish to inspect the rest of the house, and his host, with the same obedient alacrity shown by the teamster, rose and led the way into his well-lighted bed-room. It had one window opening onto the garden and another over the street. Kallistrat went to the bed, poked the mattress and murmured.

"Soft bed, that!" Then, with a glance at the books on the shelf, he asked, "Do you read them?"

"Yes."

"All?"

"Yes."

Mironoff thought he could detect a touch of sarcasm in these questions, and could hardly keep his temper. They next went into a small

drawing-room which was filled with flowers and various little ornaments which his father had made. Kallistrat stood stock-still in the middle of the room, and after a silence turned to Mironoff:

"You ought to get married."

Everything in the room seemed to protest against the intrusion of this bare-footed visitor. The very planks of the floor creaked, the lamp-chimney tinkled, the Sunday plate, a present to Mironoff's mother from her friends, jingled on the sideboard. Mironoff was offended by Kallistrat's casual attitude toward the unusual objects that surrounded him. He was surprised at nothing. He neither noticed nor praised.

"He envies me, that's what it is, and he pretends he doesn't care, the devil!" The tinkle of the glass sounded more loudly as the carpenter examined the globe.

"This a globe?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Common. Imitation of the earth. But why out of brass?"

"It plays a tune."

"Can't be," said Kallistrat. "Show me how it works." Mironoff opened the cupboard, set the globe on the table and turned the crank.

Some of the tiny spurs had come off, but there were enough left to afford an idea of what it must have been able to do:

> Siskin, Siskin,
> Where have you been?

The carpenter drew away from the table and listened.

"That *Siskin?*" he inquired.

"Yes," said Mironoff, with a sad smile as he thought of the past. Finally Kallistrat stopped him, and taking him by one hand, with the fingers of the other he poked at the continents and oceans outlined on the globe. Then he sat down.

"Where did you get that?" he asked thoughtfully.

"My father made it."

"Why does it play *Siskin?*"

"That's a nursery song. I was just a child at the time."

"I see," answered the other, putting the end of his beard into his mouth and chewing it reflectively. At last, blowing it out as though he were extinguishing a candle, he rapped the Arctic Ocean and grimly smiled.

"It's amusing. Though I might add that *Siskin* is scarcely appropriate. The globe is a

means of education, and to have that tune suddenly start up—you see? Was your father clever?"

"Yes. And very gay."

"Hm! Odd creatures—" He began again examining the globe, poking it with his varnish-stained fingers. "It's simple, and yet full of wisdom. A drop of water, a few clods of earth, and we're told it hangs suspended in space. Remarkable. And millions of people are said to live on that ball, eh? Do you believe that, you poor orphan?"

"Why not? I'm living on it, and so are you," he replied wearily.

"Well," said Kallistrat, rising and offering his hand, "many thanks. Good-night." On his way out he paused in the kitchen, clutched his beard in one hand and said grimly: "The whole thing no bigger than your head, and yet—Very remarkable. But I must say *Siskin* is inappropriate. Your father did that just to make people gasp, see? Same as whistling in church. It ought to have been Hosannah, or some other church tune, or else a military march. Bum, bum, bum—like that." And humming a martial air, he departed.

"Go to the devil!" Mironoff not only thought,

but actually said it. When he took up the globe to return it to the cupboard, he noticed that a part of North America was split, and had actually fallen down and become part of South America. That fool Kallistrat had done it! Wetting the tip of one finger, he repaired the damage, and turned the globe in order to hear the tune once again. Was Kallistrat right about the little song? But what *would* be more appropriate? All other tunes seemed quite as unsuitable:

> On a rather dirty street
> Friend Ivan swayed along,
> Rather drunk he—

Then there was his father's old favorite:

> Seven sons, seven sons,
> What shall we do with seven sons?

And what others besides?

> I wish to tell you, tell you, tell you.

Ah, that piece of North America had come loose again. How odd to watch the scrap of blue paper curl up like a shaving.

"I'll mend it tomorrow with glue. Why, I wonder, did he say it ought to play Hosannah?

Surely he doesn't believe in God? Any more that I do."

His elbows on the table, his forehead almost touching the globe, Mironoff surrendered himself to the flood of thoughts that beset him, slow, vague, unfamiliar.

The street urchins had thrown mud at the blue façade of the house, drawn pictures with chalk, and written indecent remarks wherever they could find a place. On the topmost panel of the gate someone—evidently an adult—had written the following words in lead-pencil:

"This house stands upside down. A fool, lives here."

When Mironoff first saw this he was grievously offended, but noticing that the last comma was misplaced, clearly showing the writer's ignorance of grammar, he was greatly relieved. Fool yourself!

There was no doubt that the entire street had demonstrated with unmistakable emphasis its hostility to the blue house, but Mironoff felt no irritation. He was much too deeply concerned by something more serious: the carpenter and the teamster had fastened themselves upon him and were not to be shaken loose. They were like shadows. Artamon called nearly every afternoon

to sweep the yard, chop wood, work in the garden and growl, while the carpenter, behaving as though he were lord of the place, took it upon himself to introduce various improvements, and even made suggestions to Pavlovna about her housekeeping. The old woman listened to his words in silence, but as soon as he left, would quickly make the sign of the cross. Mironoff had often noticed this performance, and had only smiled at the woman's simplicity. His hatred for Kallistrat became intensified. That fellow was somehow destroying his dreams of a sky-blue life, raising before him a barrier of apprehension, and putting him, Mironoff, into the background. One day he summoned up all his courage to say to Kallistrat:

"This is all utter nonsense."

"You try and see if you can live without nonsense!" returned Kallistrat. Mironoff began to regard the intruder with feelings almost of fear. There was something abnormal about his agility. He remembered the day Kallistrat had hopped down from the garden wall like a bird. A presentiment of something out of the ordinary settled upon Mironoff's mind and oppressed him. He recalled the day when Kallistrat had made the floor creak and the glass tinkle. Why was it that

every time he came in the same thing occurred? Mironoff did not believe in sorcery, but he had heard and read about persons who possessed mysterious powers, and could not escape the conviction that perhaps the very next day the carpenter would reveal his gifts in some terrible way.

It happened quite unexpectedly. On Sunday evening Kallistrat came in bringing a young girl with him. She was plump and had very fat legs. She wore a scarlet silk blouse. Her fine teeth glittered whenever she opened her mouth, which was small. Her cheeks glowed with a slightly purple flush. On one of the fingers of her left hand sparkled a pink stone set in a ring. Her eyes, it seemed to Mironoff, reflected the tint of the stone; they looked like the eyes of a white mouse.

"Her name is Serafina," said Kallistrat, pushing her toward Mironoff. "A fine girl."

She smiled. There was a queer disagreeable odor that emanated from her. When she sat down, her white skirt, tightly drawn over her large hips, slipped up, revealing a pair of round legs. She shuffled her shoes restlessly over the floor, and stamped with her heels. Her dark hair was brushed back smoothly, the braid hanging sleekly down the back of her neck. In it she

had stuck a large yellow comb, which made her look like a hen.

"How awfully hot!" she exclaimed, fanning her flushed face with her handkerchief.

The carpenter was dressed in a gray sail-cloth suit, an embroidered blue shirt, and highly polished boots, into the tops of which he had thrust his trousers. His beard and golden hair appeared to have undergone a thorough cleaning, and danced like tongues of flame. His dry, hawk-like face was graver and more restless than ever; his green eyes sparkled malignantly, seeming to see and understand everything.

"She is not capricious," he explained, "and she understands housekeeping. You can see for yourself she has plenty of flesh on her bones."

"How do you like it?" asked the girl, pouring tea into the glasses—"Strong?"

Mironoff sat opposite her, leaning over the table. His eyes twitched, his lips trembled. He wanted to pull out his tongue and wet his lips as he had seen the girl do when she ate jam. But he forced himself to smile in order to show the woman his ugly and uneven teeth. Her lips were very red and thick. He observed her sucking the cherry-stones until they were white. Such lips might suck all the blood out of a man. The

carpenter's words "plenty of flesh on her bones," and her question "Strong?", made him blush. He thought of dogs, and purposely knocked his spoon against the edge of his glass, and spilled tea over his trousers. Jumping up unceremoniously, he hurried out to the porch. It was drizzling outside; the warm earth quickly absorbed the moisture, and the foliage glistened. High above, dove-colored clouds were condensing the unbearable heat.

"He wants me to marry that woman," thought Mironoff, as he caught a few drops of rain in one outstretched palm. The odor of the girl's perspiration was still in his nostrils. Though he was filled with repulsion, another sensation arose, not altogether unpleasant.

The carpenter appeared the next moment on the porch.

"Did you burn yourself?" he asked.

"Now listen," began Mironoff in a hurried undertone, "I don't want to marry, and I advise you to give up this scheme." He remembered his mother's words and repeated them now with delight: "What kind of a husband would I make? Why, you said the same thing yourself. Take her away! I'll give her twenty-five roubles, and you may have fifty, if you like. I mean it."

His knees shook, he would almost have knelt to Kallistrat, who stood there smiling mercilessly and twisting the end of his beard:

"You're quite mad, Mironoff, my boy. Why, you've got to get married. You've buried yourself in your books, you dream away your life. You have a rush of blood to the brain. You're positively livid. Your lips are trembling. Why? I'm telling you why. It's time you lived according to law and custom. I'll supply the wife, and you and she will supply the children."

"I can't. I don't want to——"

"Of course you can. It's time you stopped trying to astonish people. That's not your line. Other people will only fool you." The carpenter took him by the arm, raised him up and shaking the rain from his clothes, went on: "I know human nature. People will pretend to your face that they think you remarkable, that they are interested in you, but at the same moment they'll rob and deceive you. That happens all the time, I tell you."

His eyes tight shut, Mironoff saw a vision of street urchins defacing sky-blue houses with mud. They were his children, all of them. His wife, this "fine girl," sat at the window munching apples and eating pie.

He was now sitting opposite Serafina and it seemed to him that she had become plumper than ever; her breasts heaved, making the stiff silk of her blouse rustle; her small round mouth gaped wearily. In her sausage-like fingers she clutched tightly her white cambric handkerchief, wiping the perspiration from her forehead. Her pink eyes melted in a smile. Her perspiration, thought Mironoff, must be as thick and oily as molasses, and no doubt neither flies nor mosquitoes would have the courage to attack her india-rubber body. Meantime the carpenter poured cherry-juice into his tea and gulped down the strong dark beverage. Shamelessly, boastfully he declared:

"What I like most is to arrange marriages. I'm fond of noise and excitement. I like rows. I enjoy watching people standing on their heads. It's funny to see young people falling in love." He said this without the shadow of a smile. Stealing a look in his direction, Mironoff noticed that his face was twitching. At that moment it was terrible to look upon. It was fortunate the carpenter had not worn his leather band round his head today.

"You must learn to enjoy life, Mironoff. Move about freely, you know. Learn to commit

sins, there's no great harm in that. Are you accountable to anybody? Who's your master, tell me?"

"I don't know." There was something terrible about that question.

"There. You see? If it weren't for the presence of this girl, I'd tell you soon enough who ought to be your master. But she knows what I mean, the rogue! Don't you, Fimka?"

"I know nothing at all," answered the "fine girl," trying to speak according to the rules of etiquette. Mironoff felt something touch his foot, and a moment later two feet encircle it and hold it fast. Pulling away, he jumped up, exclaiming:

"What are you doing?"

The girl flushed scarlet. Kallistrat poked Mironoff in the side, laughing loudly:

"She knows! The rogue, she knows!"

It was only afterward that Mironoff could recall what had happened. The carpenter left the room with a laugh, while the girl approached Mironoff, smiling:

"You naughty man, why did you make me blush like that before my uncle?" She seated herself at his side and inquired if he liked giblet soup, to which Mironoff answered that in Paris

giblets were thrown to the dogs; in that marvellous city people disliked such filthy messes as soaked apples. There the inhabitants were noble-minded folk, who never dreamed of forcing their way into other people's houses. Suddenly an unsuspected force brought him to his feet, made him dizzy and hot. By the time the fit was over the girl had disappeared and the carpenter re-entered, seized him by the hand and inquired in a tone that sounded infinitely remote:

"You fool! Why do you push the girl around this way? How dare you? She is my niece, not yet your wife. And this broken plate? What's happened to you?"

Mironoff listened in amazement. Though Kallistrat stood close by his side, his voice seemed to come from under the floor. Bits of broken cups crunched under the soles of his shoes; everything in the room swayed.

"You can't stand wine, I see. Don't drink it." Kallistrat offered him a glass of bluish-looking water, as Mironoff peered into his eyes. . . .

On awaking next morning he thought he had only dreamed of the "fine girl." He had actually dreamed of a fox, a large fawn-colored animal running round amid the stars, licking them. This had brought on a suffocating dark-

ness that swallowed up the entire earth. Far off on the horizon one lone ray of light remained, but even there the stars were being wiped out by the lilac-colored priest Boris, who was swinging a censer bearing the following inscription: "To Let. Room for a Single Man."

This dream had terrified him, and immediately on waking up, Mironoff started to the kitchen for a drink of water, but on his way he stepped into something slimy on the floor. He returned to bed, tormented by thirst, and unable to sleep. Sitting up again, he saw that what he had stepped into was cherry jam. It was all over one foot and had stained the sheet. He looked at the floor and was sorrowfully convinced that the events of the night before were not a dream.

"Tomorrow," he said to himself with a sigh, "I'll sell the house and all my belongings, go to Paris and rent a room. For a single man. I must learn to speak French." And he took down his grammar, opening it at random, and read this question:

"Que savez-vous sur Bernardin de St. Pierre?"

Between the pages he discovered a pressed butterfly, which plunged him once again into mournful meditations. Suppose, he wondered, when he arrived at Paris, the people would begin asking

him about St. Bernardin? He knew nothing about that Saint. . . . And, closing the book, he thrust it under his pillow, laughing at the sudden delightful idea that had just come to him: how wonderfully convenient and pleasant it was to know only the strictly necessary words, and none of the others! This gave one the privilege of not understanding other people, not having to think of all they said. This was just the way to assure one of a quiet and peaceful existence. Yes, exactly, he thought as he watched the pendulum on the clock trying in vain to sever two nosegays of blue flowers that hung near it on the wall. But why wait to sell the house? Why not sell it at once? Surely, the carpenter would not be allowed to enter the walls of Paris.

He laughed in old Pavlovna's face as she entered noiselessly, and strode past her from room to room, making a rough estimate of the value of the furniture. Seven hundred roubles, perhaps —or was it four hundred? No, that's not right. And, correcting himself aloud, "One thousand one hundred" he said finally. It was amusing to say that rather than "eleven hundred;" there were more zeros, and that was a comfort. "Zeros, zeros," he muttered, as Pavlovna followed him, sternly ordering him to come and drink his tea.

He drank one glass at last. The tea tasted bitter, and he determined to go out into the fields beyond the river, to lie all day on the sand among the juniper bushes, returning to sleep at a hotel. "Try and find me there, you idiot!" he growled. But he changed his mind after all, took his fishing-rods and went down to the river. As he passed the gate he looked up at the windows of the Rosanoffs' house and saw Lisa, who was wiping the window-pane. He went up to her and speaking swiftly, he said: "I simply must talk to you about Paris. Meet me this evening at the cemetery."

Lisa drew back without answering, but this did not trouble him: he was convinced that the girl would come.

He did no fishing that day, only lay on the bank looking up at the sky. That aroused neither anxiety nor meditation. He fell asleep from time to time, passing the day thus until the sun, swelling and reddening as it always did at dusk, stood just above the roof of the principal building of the insane asylum.

Returning home, he ate supper, changed into his Sunday clothes, and began to think: "The carpenter will come and ask where I am going. I had better go into the garden." But once on the

porch, he stopped and sat down on the steps. Kallistrat would see him in the garden. "I'm clever and perspicacious: that's why I dislike thinking." He could see in the neatly kept garden the slightly protruding stubble left from the cut burdocks, sticking up like pipes. He could even see a mouse in one clump. The night was warm and damp. Mironoff could imagine that the pipes were softly playing the familiar strains of a cradle song, so softly that not even the mouse was startled. Before him rose the vision of a slim girl dressed in light blue; he could hear her voice. It was unusually pleasant, and though he did not catch the meaning of her words, it made no difference; in fact it was all the more pleasant. He would sell his house to this girl's father, who would allow him to marry her. He would take her to Paris with him, to live in that room for a single man. . . .

He sat there a long time and was brought back to reality only by the sound of a tumult in the street. Evidently someone was being pursued. A voice brutally rent the silence of the evening, crying,

"Run back! Hold him!"

Mironoff jumped to his feet just as the kitchen clock struck eight. "It's time!" he said, "it's

time!" He strode to the gate, walked down the street swinging his cane, and made his way to the sandy hillocks where the brick quadrangle of the cemetery wall rose to meet him. He could still distinguish the brass on the cross above the chapel. The cemetery was comparatively new, and had as yet few graves. Over the grounds pines and puny birches struggled for existence in the poor soil, not yet sufficiently fertilized by the bodies of the dead. The grass was gray, and stretched as far as the horizon. Mironoff slowly walked along the stony path, beset with ants bearing pine-needles. He took aim at one and struck at it with his cane, but missed.

"Very well," he said smiling, "live on, if you want to."

Over the wall he could see the strip of road along which Lisa was to come. Beyond it houses and gardens ran down to the river's edge. The river itself, coiling in and out like a leaden snake, at one place visible, at another hidden by trees or houses. At the tiny toy-like persons Mironoff shook his cane.

"You'll stay where you are, all of you, while I go to Paris! I'm sick of you all!"

The factory chimney on the far side of the river spat out clouds of smoke, dimming the eve-

ning sky, still tinged with red on the far horizon. A dark cloud, flourishing a tail, threatened the rest of the sky.

"Boredom!" He recalled the carpenter's words.

At that moment he saw the carpenter approaching, twirling his beard in one hand, and holding the other under his apron. He was walking with measured steps as though pacing off ground along the road. Mironoff's heart sank as he thought, "He's spying on me. Here he is, the minute I think of him!" Kallistrat advanced some distance, then turned sharply into the field, toward two aged fir-trees, as though leading himself by the beard.

"You won't deceive me," said Mironoff, crouching behind the wall and watching the carpenter. He was really afraid, and crouched still lower next to the warm bricks, spreading out his hands as though he were being crucified. Thrusting his fists into the holes left in the top of the wall, he wriggled his thumbs in the direction of the carpenter, muttering, "you won't deceive me. . . ." But Kallistrat had turned off again toward the road, making strange gestures, perhaps counting on his fingers. He stood facing the street, the same street where Lisa was due to

appear. What would happen? Something terrible of course. Mironoff wanted to scream.

But Lisa did not come. The carpenter took the leather band from his head, shook his golden mane, put the band on again and walked slowly down the road.

"He'll hide somewhere and then follow us," thought Mironoff. By now he realised he could not avoid Kallistrat, who would inexorably pursue him and force him to marry that "fine girl." He would become his slave, exactly as Artamon had become. Pressing his forehead hard against the bricks, he suddenly remembered the carpenter's question, "Who's your master?" And he recalled the loathsome laughter with which this was uttered. Surely he already considered himself Mironoff's master. Mironoff realised the importance of that idea which the girl had driven from his consciousness by those fat restless legs of hers: "Who really is my master?" He shuddered. "He knows there is no one to protect me, he knows it." . . .

Down there, near where Kallistrat lay hidden, he could see dense clouds of smoke, so thick that it seemed one might almost walk on them. "I like noise and excitement," Kallistrat had said. What noise? Just noise and movement, and that

is wicked and stupid, like the lives of all the people in this town. The carpenter liked wickedness, that much was clear. He thought of the other things that had been said, and pondering them, discovered deep meanings. "You can't astonish people." Astonishing people, making them gasp, simply meant doing things differently. To be normal one must think of nothing except the commonplace; only in that way can one be sure of living unmolested. Apparently life is impossible without interference from the carpenter. The cunning fellow has discovered that the man who lives alone and has no master must be made his slave.

"Ha, they all call on God, but it's the carpenter who bosses, ordering people about as though they were dogs."

Such reflections were unwelcome, and Mironoff was sure they were put into his head by the malicious influence of Kallistrat. He had never felt this way before he knew the carpenter.

Gray masses of clouds crawled lazily high above the cemetery, covering the sky with dirty splotches of gray. It reminded him of the days when his mother in one of her drunken fits would go about the house wiping with a dirty rag the window-panes, cupboards, and mirrors.

There was moisture in the air as the last rays of light disappeared over the sandy graves. Mironoff at last stood up, and looked toward the road, but it seemed to have been swallowed up in the earth. Walking quickly, though endeavoring not to make too much noise as he passed over the stony path, he trudged home. As he came near his gate he perceived that there were still lights in the Rosanoff house. He ran up to one window and tapped lightly against it with his cane. The round face of Claudia appeared and without the least embarrassment, Mironoff asked her to warn her friend against the carpenter.

"What?" asked the girl in a frightened whisper.

"He is watching." Claudia closed the window. Mironoff thought he heard a cry of terror behind that window, followed by a peal of laughter. Peering cautiously around, he crossed the street and entered his own yard. Something small and dark rose from the steps. He drew back.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"Me," answered Pavlovna. "The carpenter has been asking for you."

"I'm not at home!" he said, and then in a whisper, "I'm never at home any more!" He

went into his room and without lighting the lamp, undressed and went to bed. He could not sleep. He was bothered by the mosquitoes. His heart was heavy, for he felt that the carpenter was not far away, perhaps out there in the garden, hiding behind the window out on the roof, twisting his beard in one hand and deciding what torture to inflict on the morrow. Throwing back the covers he sat bolt upright, his bare feet on the floor, listening. Not a sound but the soft patter of a light rain on the roof. The heat was oppressive. A stray mosquito whined. He took his pillow and sat holding it on his knee, waiting.

"I must kill that mosquito." He rocked to and fro wearily, and at last fell asleep, still holding the pillow. He awoke with a start, sat up again and listened. The gray dusk of dawn gradually penetrated the room, creeping in through the dark motionless leaves of the flowers on the window-sill. His head whirled with a multitude of memories, but he sat there waiting, mystified, silent, immobile. The sun rose and painted liquid pearls on the moist window-pane. Dazed, Mironoff rolled over and fell into a deep sleep. It seemed that he was roused only a moment later by a strange screeching sound in the direction of the door.

A man dressed in yellow entered the room shrieking. He sat on the edge of the bed, took Mironoff's hand, and pulled a black watch out of his pocket. Looking at it, he asked in a high treble voice as though he were an old friend:

"Well, how do we feel?"

"No weevil at all," answered Mironoff crossly.

"Where are your pains?"

"What are your pains?" asked Mironoff in a tone of bitter sarcasm.

"How did you sleep?"

"I slept lying down." Mironoff burst into loud laughter, delighted with his own quick wit. He felt full of an unwonted energy, and very cheerful. He really liked this stocky little fellow, though he did reek of shoe-blacking. He resembled one of those funny toys that stand up when you knock them down. His face was puffy and looked as though it were made of rubber. His complexion was of a bluish tint, and his eyes a queer yellow that swam listlessly like rayless stars on a wet night. Mironoff glanced toward the window: a bluish cloud glided swiftly along the ridge of the sky. The little man rubbed his blue chin with the palm of his hand as he asked, "Do you know me? I'm the assistant physician Isakoff."

A little embarrassed, Mironoff inquired what time it was.

"Half-past twelve."

"I'm hungry."

"That is very good," said the other, putting his watch back into his pocket. The room was flooded with sunlight, and the words spoken in it seemed to float here and there like rainbow-tinted bubbles. Mironoff pondered.

"If it were only always like that!"

"What?"

"Everything."

Deep in his heart he felt a happiness that lifted him above the earth. Bare-footed and with nothing on but his underclothes, he went into the kitchen to wash, but stopped at the door. He had caught sight of a shock of golden hair encircled by a leather band. Kallistrat was bent over the table, writing something with a pencil in a dirty note-book. Mironoff turned back noiselessly and sat down on his bed. All his new-found energy and happiness had vanished.

"What's the matter?" asked the doctor in his sing-song voice, and pressed his fingers to the patient's temples. Mironoff turned aside, shook his head and asked in a whisper:

"Did he bring you here?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Where did he spend the night?"

"How should I know? People usually spend their nights at home."

"He's not a usual man."

"How so?"

Mironoff made no answer to this, nor to any of the other questions addressed to him by the assistant. He rocked to and fro, his hands clutching the edge of the bed, biting his lips and wondering desperately how he was to rid himself of the carpenter. The assistant passed into the kitchen, his shoes screeching as he walked, while Mironoff went to the window and began throwing the flower-pots out into the street. He had put one foot on the sill when he felt himself seized in an iron grip and held back by the shoulders. He knew who it was who held him, and submitted to the superior power, allowing himself to be led back to bed again, where he lay down without saying a word. Closing his eyes, he listened to the whispers of the other two, making out nothing but incomprehensible syllables that formed themselves into meaningless groups of sounds. The words were like gray shadows flitting about. He opened his eyes as the carpenter inquired:

"What's wrong with you, my boy? Sick?"

The green light in Kallistrat's eyes reminded Mironoff of something he had already experienced. It seemed years ago, when he was a boy.

"What are you staring at? Don't you know me?"

"He's trying to make me remember," thought Mironoff, and said aloud: "It seems I have seen you before . . . Yes, that's it . . ."

"A good dose of bromide is what he needs."

"They mean me," thought Mironoff. "They'll give me poison." He moved backward, sat up, crossed his legs, and leaning his head against the wall, stared into the corner, at the ceiling, and then with a cold shudder, riveted his eyes on a green spot on the wall. There he saw the picture called *The Death of a Sinner*. There was the green devil at one corner laughing. It all became crystal clear to him. That was the reason why the carpenter had ruined the sky-blue house; why he could swim through the air; why he liked noise and excitement. "Who is your master?" he asked himself triumphantly, because now he knew: Konstantin Mironoff does not believe in the ordinary God, the God of ordinary people . . . It was all clear now. But what was to be his next step? He felt hot and frightened.

Without uncrossing his legs, he rolled over on one side.

"I want to sleep," he said.

"But what about eating?" asked the assistant.

"I'm going to sleep."

"Well, that's good for you, too."

The two went out, Kallistrat saying to the other: "Just like a baby."

He might deceive the doctor, but not Mironoff, who had at last made up his mind what to do. The first thing was to hide from the carpenter. After a few moments' reflection he got up, wrapped himself in a sheet, and looked at himself in the mirror. He was sorry he had no beard: that would have made him look more like Lazarus risen from the grave. He was terrified by what he saw in the mirror: something out of the depths was luring him on. He supported himself against the door, and muttered in a hoarse whisper: "I'm coming, I'm coming at once, My Lord." He peered through the door and saw that the kitchen was empty. A samovar stood on the table, shining in the clear sunlight. Little clouds of steam hovered over it. Mironoff went to it and turned the tap. He felt impelled to do that, but when he saw the clear jet of steaming water trickle down and melt away

on the surface of the tray, he was afraid. He stopped and listened. Somewhere out in the yard he heard Pavlovna and the carpenter.

"No! Himself?"

"Himself" was of course God, the ordinary God. Why, Kallistrat had already divined what Mironoff was going to tell him.

"Know Him?" he heard the carpenter say, raising a threatening fist at the old woman. Scarcely touching the floor with his feet, Mironoff went into the antechamber and climbed the stairs to the garret, inhaling deep breaths of hot and dusty air. Closing the door behind him he knelt down facing the semicircular window. He began to sing a Psalm to his God, crossing himself and bowing his head to the floor. He had forgotten the words, and stopped a moment to reflect. Rising and standing near the window he turned his face to the sky and said in a loud voice: "Forgive me, I was wrong . . . I believe. I pray——"

But the carpenter was nearer to him than God. He had heard the confession out in the garden, and cried out anxiously:

"Look out there at the garret window!"

Mironoff rushed back to the door, dragging to it everything he could find to use for a barri-

cade; broken furniture, boxes, baskets, and boards. The moment he had made everything secure, he made the sign of the cross and murmured "God protect me!" Meanwhile the carpenter had run up-stairs and was now thumping on the garret door:

"Konstantin! See here! Listen to me, I tell you——"

"Afraid, are you?" shouted Mironoff and laughed, feeling himself secure, especially after he had made the sign of the cross.

"Konstantin, I'm your friend, am I not?"

"No!" shouted Mironoff, and seizing a loose brick from the chimney, flung it against the door. It struck one of the boxes. The resounding noise strengthened his resolution to defend himself against the carpenter. A moment after, the barricade began to dance as though animated by the carpenter's sorcery: chairs and boxes tumbled to the floor in a heap. Mironoff watched the frantic but vain efforts of his adversary. Finally, however, straining under the violent attacks from outside, the door swung on its hinges and fell in. The figure of Kallistrat, framed in the gaping doorway, frightened Mironoff for a moment, but he had sufficient presence of mind to seize another brick and throw it straight at the

carpenter's beard. He saw Kallistrat throw his arms wildly in the air, heard him groan and fall backwards down the stairs with a mighty crash. Mironoff, overcome with ecstatic joy, leapt in the air and ran to the doorway, where he stood throwing everything he could lay hands on at the prostrate form of his vanquished enemy. He roared with laughter to hear the indistinct groans of the unfortunate carpenter, who was calling for the fire-brigade.

"Help! Water! He'll kill himself!"

Mironoff stopped for an instant and listened. Outside in the street he could hear the cries of boys and then the familiar base tones of Rosanoff saying, "It was you who made him go out of his mind."

"Yes," cried Mironoff, "it's he. Do you know who he is? Can you see? Ha!" He was suffocated with joy. At last he realised that everybody knew the carpenter for what he was. He was about to go downstairs when he was stopped short by the carpenter's voice:

"Don't hurt me, Artamon, do you hear?"

Did that mean that Artamon, too, had discovered the truth about him and had finally thrown off the magic spell? But the teamster himself

had meantime come up to the garret doorway, kicking aside the wreckage. Opening his ugly mouth and spreading his great fingers as usual, he advanced toward Mironoff with a growl:

"What's all the fuss about now?"

Of course, Kallistrat had instructed Artamon to deal with him as though he had been a horse.

"I'm not a horse," said Mironoff, as Artamon extended his arms toward him.

"Come now," said the teamster, coming ever closer. "Don't be afraid." Kallistrat now came in and together the two forced Mironoff into a corner. Making a desperate attempt to evade the carpenter, Mironoff threw himself on all fours and crawled toward Artamon, but the teamster seized him by the shoulders and picked him up, head downwards, grunting, "Caught him!"

Mironoff struck blindly and knocked his head against the dark wall. His body seemed to melt away in the darkness. Later the darkness slowly dissolved, and he realised that he was lying on something soft that swayed and floated. His arms and legs were broken, his head felt abnormally large and had become so heavy that he had not the strength to lift it. The words of the little song rang in his ears,

Seven sons, seven sons,
What shall we do with seven sons?

A light blue sky dazzled overhead, indistinct white figures floated in the soft light, urging him on: now two of them bent over him with quick nimble movements, making his broken body a little more comfortable. They rocked him and made him feel that he had no body at all, then carried him up, up into the blue canopy overhead. Mironoff realised that God had heard his prayer and thought that His angels were taking him from the earth. Yes, here was God Himself, tall, dressed in white, with golden spectacles, answering Mironoff's cry of gladness with a gentle nod. He floated past, caressing him with a cool breeze and the delicious odor of flowers. It was wonderful to see that this was not the ordinary God of old, the God of simple folk, but the true and wise Maker of the infinite harmonious stillness of things. The world was now quiet, and when the Maker of the Blue Stillness again appeared to him, he realised that with this God he could speak in the language of Paris:

"*Je vous remercie, Mon Dieu. Je vous remercie que vous—*" He could go no further in French and lapsed into Russian: "Forgive me, I really don't know the language yet. It's

ver, difficult. I found it very hard. The other God, the ordinary God, had not the power to help me out. I don't like Him. I have always wanted to come to you, even from the first. Long ago."

"How long?" asked the Maker of the Blue Stillness, looking into his eyes through his gold-rimmed spectacles, and speaking with the tenderness of a loving father.

"*Toujours*—always. I'm not too late, am I?

"Oh no," smiled the Maker. "Only, people are as a rule not in any hurry to come to me." It seemed to Mironoff that there was a touch of reproachful sadness in His voice.

"*Oui,*" he agreed, feeling that all his beautiful blue thoughts and words were slipping from him. He was uneasy with the fear that he would not have time to say all he wanted to say.

"No, they are in no hurry. They marry 'fine girls' like Serafina, damn them—*Pardon!* I beg your pardon! They live like dogs, you know, without shame. Then they have children, eat soaked apples so greedily! Well, as far as I'm concerned, I ask for nothing. The ordinary God pays no attention to those people, it's the carpenter who orders their poor lives. You know it was I who first discovered who the carpenter was. He

is the demon of trifles, of noise and excitement, the Devil of Hustle. It was he who invented drunkenness, soaked apples, marriage, fish pies, gambling, everything that I dislike and don't want."

At the thought of the carpenter, Mironoff screamed with anger, but the Maker took him gently with one hand and turning over the leaves of his Book of Laws with the other, asked him, "Are you often subject to headaches?"

"Head? *La tête?*" He remembered the French word, and putting his hands up, felt his head. It was smooth and cold as a piece of marble.

"It is said to hang in the air." He recalled this phrase, as he pressed his head, then he began singing plaintively

Siskin, Siskin
Where have you been?

* * * * * * *

"Did you add much to it?" I inquired of Dr. Alexander Alexin after he had told me the story of this man's case.

"You, of course, would have added more," he answered with a smile. "The story was told me by a colleague who was treating Mironoff's arm. Mironoff threw himself out of the window

when he caught sight of the carpenter who had come to visit at the hospital.

A few days ago I met Mironoff again. He had come to consult me—slight touch of bronchitis. We remembered each other. He's not a man you'd easily forget. I think he's something of a knave, though he pulls a long face at the world. He owns the Book-bindery on the Morskaia. . . .

Konstantin Dmitrievitch Mironoff peered at the bottom of his glass where he had discovered a still undissolved piece of sugar. Carefully scraping it out with his spoon, he put it into his mouth, now surrounded with bristly whiskers, and sighed deeply.

"Yes," he said, "that's a fine case of unbalanced mentality! Well, shall we get down to business now?"

And picking up a pencil with his long skinny fingers, he began figuring on a scrap of paper.

"Considering that you have been recommended by the highly esteemed Dr. Alexin, and that you are in the same line of business as I am, well—I shall charge you—for the leather and cloth—Is that too much?"

"Not at all. It's no more than it's worth."

He explained to me in detail all about prices,

the whims of his women customers, the taxes and various other things, to convince me of his disinterested and reasonable services. As he spoke, he stroked his bumpy skull with the palm of his hand. His long ears stuck out like the handles of a travelling-bag. His large nose nestled in the wiry hairs of his well-trimmed moustache. His cheek-bones moved strangely, and he spoke in a dull and colorless monotone. It seemed that he was chewing or sucking his words. The room was small and stuffy, and filled with the scent of leather, glue, and machine oil.

"Tell me," I asked, "how were you conscious that reason was returning to your brain?"

"You see," he answered almost reluctantly, "I'd almost forgotten all about it until the Doctor reminded me. It's really not very interesting and I'm somewhat ashamed. Other people go crazy in a decent or even a clever way: they imagine they are kings, for instance, or animals, something either very grand or at least funny. In my case it was downright foolishness, stupidity. There was an engineer at the asylum who thought he was a chess-knight. He was always jumping either to the right or the left of the door, and could never go through it. When the Doctor told me I thought he was God, I was really

very grieved. A decent fellow, that Doctor."

"How about the carpenter?"

"Oh, he died. Not long ago—four years. I've lived here nine. I have to, because of my weak chest. The carpenter drank himself to death. While I was ill (for eleven months, that was) I had to bring him into court. He took it upon himself to look after my property, and made such a mess of it! He, too, was insane, like the poets and writers over there . . ."

He pointed in the direction of a book he was then repairing. Then coughing and passing his hand over his throat, "Yes, yes," he continued, "I read books when I have time. Usually before going to sleep. No, books have no effect on me. Writers have nothing interesting to write about nowadays. All about love—as though people needed that! Yes, a knowledge of French is very useful: I bind many French books.—Well, then, we're agreed: thirteen volumes in full leather. The Bible will cost you more, though, it's a fat volume.—Tell me, why are you so interested in the carpenter?" he asked, slightly offended, and continued in his drowsy manner:

"He was an ordinary man, who deserved his fate. He had made up his mind that I should marry his niece, and then he made a mess of

everything. He looked on my property as his own, but I can truly say I had him in a corner, as I did my father-in-law Rosanoff, whom he owed a great deal to, for timber."

As I listened to the reluctant tale, I was seized with a mad desire to drive Mironoff crazy again. But I listened as he brought the story to a close:

"Lisaveta Ivanovna died after giving birth to a baby girl. The child was still-born. I married again. Yes, thank you, I'm happy and peaceful. Her mother is a Greek, but she turned out quite respectable. To tell you the truth, it wasn't so peaceful with the first: she was subject to whims and tears. A difficult character. And pious, you have no idea! It was ridiculous, if you don't mind my saying so. Crosses and ikons all about her, and talking of nothing but miracles. She feared death."

He coughed, wrinkled up his forehead and added in a didactic tone: "As though there was anything to be afraid of! One should remember the Cossack proverb, 'While I am here, there is no death, and when death comes, I will not be here.' Very true. And you might add, 'You will not die before your death.' "

He smiled a grim smile, showing a neat row of false teeth.

"On my Name Day, Lisaveta Ivanovna gave me a ring representing a skull. Can you imagine? I loathe human bones. She was quite fantastic, and a bit mad. After she died I had to bring suit against her father on account of the dowry. He was a very highly respected citizen, but too greedy. . . . Shall we finish our business?—*Don Quixote* in two volumes. Leather? Don't try to make me reduce any price.

"Remember, you might be able to make some use of my story."

"Are you reckoning that in the bill?"

"Why not?" he asked, not without surprise. "Everything should be reckoned in this world. We must be careful: he who is careful is favored by the Goddess of Fortune . . ."

"No," I reflected, "nothing can possibly drive him mad again." Aloud I asked him, "Have you still your globe?"

Stroking the back of his head and glancing at the scrap of paper before him, he grudgingly answered:

"The carpenter started to mend it once, but all he did was to smash the musical cylinder. . . ."